The Dissertation Committee for Charlotte Elizabeth Howell Certifies that this is the approved version of the following dissertation:

Divine Programming: Religion and Prime-time American Television Production in the Post-Network Era

Committee:

Alisa Perren, Supervisor

Kathryn Fuller-Seeley

Tom Schatz

Horace Newcomb

Jorie Lagerwey

Divine Programming: Religion and Prime-time American Television Production in the Post-Network Era

by

Charlotte Elizabeth Howell, B.A., M.A.

Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

The University of Texas at Austin

August 2016

Dedication

To my mother and father, Joyce and Hank, who made all of this possible.

Acknowledgements

I owe more to my advisor, Alisa Perren, than can be conveyed here. I thank her for her mentorship, teaching, guidance, advocacy, and bottomless support, all of which combine to form the best foundation I could ever hope for. I am grateful to her for every opportunity, for every time she went to bat for me, for every kind word and kick in the *tuches*. Kathy Fuller-Seeley opened her door to me during my first year of graduate school and continued to provide the greatest advice, optimism, and support. I am grateful for her openness even (especially) when I would drop in on her in her office just to chat and feel better about teaching, academia, and life by the time I left. Tom Schatz has been a wealth of knowledge and to-the-point feedback throughout my time in Texas, and I thank him for all that he has done for me. I am so humbled and grateful (and sometimes still a bit star-struck) that Horace Newcomb agreed to be on my dissertation committee; his ongoing interest in my research and career and the genuine care he has shown me have been gifts throughout this process. Jorie Lagerwey showed me that it was possible to pursue this topic on a large scale and has continued to be an incredibly valuable sounding board, mentor, and friend. I am grateful to Jorie for kindly responding to my long-winded emails when I was a Masters' student and continuing to model generosity in scholarship ever since. My thanks to Mary Beltrán, Suzanne Scott, Mary Celeste Kearney, Michael Kackman, Shanti Kumar, Janet Staiger, Thomas A. Tweed, Ted Friedman, and Alessandra Raengo who all contributed to the evolution of my thinking and of this project. I thank Paul Stekler, Char Burke, Michelle Monk, and Bert Herigstad, who all supported me throughout my work on this project. I also thank Cindy McCreery,

Cully Hamner, and all the other generous people who put me in touch with their colleagues, friends, and friends-of-friends to make this possible.

I dedicated this dissertation to my parents, but they deserve my thanks as well. My mother, Joyce B. Howell, whose enthusiasm and real-talk about joining the "family business" of academia is my inspiration, my staunchest ally, and my greatest support. My father, Hank Howell, has always shown an insatiable curiosity and unending support for my work, for which I am forever grateful. This dissertation is better because of their feedback, edits, and love. My brother, Walter, and my sister-in-law, Mary Katherine, provided a perspective to my work that was desperately needed as I was formulating my terms and argument. Grammie, Aunt Luahna, Uncle Al, Aunt Mary, Emilie, Josh, and Jess, thank you for your support over the years. I will always be grateful for my family's love and belief in me.

I have been incredibly lucky to find and maintain friendships with some of the most wonderful, smart, strong, boss ladies I have ever known. Liz, my fake cousin, you are just the best in so many ways, not the least of which was putting up with me working on final revisions during your bachelorette weekend. Brittany, my media soulmate and London buddy, you are phenomenal. Thank you and Adam for your crunch-time copyediting and kind words about my dissertation (minus the chapter Mal ate). Caroline Leader, Sarah Murray, Carolina Hernandez, Jessalynn Keller, Amanda Landa, and Morgan Blue: the other six of the magnificent seven, you made and continued to make me strive to be magnificent. Thank you for filling up my love tank every time I get to see you. Emily Kofoed, Laurel Ahnert, Lauren Cramer, Jing Zhang, Daren Randall Fowler, Jay (and honorary members Sara Baugh and Kyle Wrather): y'all will always be the

cohort of my heart and the people who pushed my brain harder than it had ever been pushed. Laura Felschow, Jackie Pinkowitz, and Annie Major, you kept me sane when it seemed impossible and made me feel like I had roots in Austin again. Nancy, Leah, the Cindys, Sherri, MaryJo, and all of my soccer ladies, thanks for getting me out of the house weekly and always being ready with positive energy and booze. To my fellow UT grads, past and present, who support each other and find joy wherever possible, thank you.

Divine Programming: Religion and Prime-time American Television Production in the Post-Network Era

Charlotte Elizabeth Howell, Ph.D.

The University of Texas at Austin, 2016

Supervisor: Alisa Perren

This dissertation addresses how religion weaves through industrial practices of prime-time American television including programming, marketing, and content creation in the twenty-first century. Through a focus on the exponential growth of this one subject, religion, across the television landscape since 9/11, I am able to illustrate how a range of industry practitioners have responded to technological, cultural, and political forces in the post-network era. This study consists of interviews with industry executives and creative figures as well as analysis of trade/journalistic discourses and network marketing materials. Using these interviews as well as both genre and ideological analysis of more than a dozen programs (e.g., *Friday Night Lights, Supernatural,* and *Daredevil*), my research charts how religious discourses—and specifically, Christian discourses—are produced, marketed, and often discursively displaced in diverse genres across the contemporary primetime dramatic American television landscape. In particular, I analyze the paradoxical situation in which, even as religious representations multiplied in contemporary American prime-time dramas, writers, producers, executives, and marketers continued to regard religion as ideologically risky. As a result, these creatives have used a variety of containment strategies to distance themselves from the idea that they or their work might be religious. The year 2015 marks the potential beginning of a new stage, illustrated by a few case studies that offer examples of an accelerated openness among creatives discussing religion in their work.

Table of Contents

List of Figures

Introduction

Religion in Hollywood: A Dynamic Process

In late May 2016, AMC, a cable network known for its quality dramas and the runaway success of its zombie comic-book adaptation of *The Walking Dead* (2010-), was gearing up to premiere its latest attempt to recapture *The Walking Dead*'s success: *Preacher* (2016-). Like *The Walking Dead*, *Preacher* is a serial drama adapted from an adult-oriented cult hit comic book series. Unlike *The Walking Dead*, *Preacher* had already failed to be adapted to television in 2008, when it was deemed too controversial even for premium cable giant, HBO.[1] Perhaps remembering this past riskiness, *Preacher*'s basic premise leading up to its May 22 premiere remained ambiguous in promotional materials. For more than two years prior to the show's premiere, reports and interviews focused on the show's potential fidelity to its comic book source. The *Preacher* that ultimately premiered differed from the source text in a fundamental way: unlike the comic, which revolved around the titular preacher Jesse Custer's life after he had left his parish (he was a preacher who no longer consistently preached), the show revolved around the vocation of the eponymous preacher, Jesse Custer. By virtue of this shift in emphasis, religious representation became more central to the narrative.

Making religious representation a central part of a show's narrative is not, in itself, surprising or unusual. Preachers and other overtly religious protagonists—from flying nuns to angels and even the Devil—and corresponding religious narratives always have been a part of American television dramas, although they were relatively small in number prior to the twenty-first century. But Jesse Custer is not a typical religious protagonist. Rather, he is foul-mouthed,

rage-filled minister with an extremely disturbing past. Custer is an edgy version of a man of God, and, as such, is highly atypical for television. Combining religious representation with "edge" – that is, marketable controversy – is something altogether new and newly acceptable. Such a mode of representation has become a way for the certain companies, executives, and creatives in contemporary television industry to differentiate their shows in an age of "peak TV."[2] When *Preacher* showrunner Sam Catlin described Jesse Custer as a "spiritual sheriff for the town" in which the series is set, he linked Custer to other fictional television preacher-protagonists that have provided spiritual leadership for their fictional communities and whose vocation has served as a show's narrative basis.[3] A notable example of a preacher-as-main character is *7th Heaven*'s Reverend Camden, a mild-mannered and wholesome patriarch character who provided religious and familial leadership on that WB drama (1996-2007). Certainly there are substantial differences between *7th Heaven* and *Preacher* in terms of style, characterization, narrative structure, and tone. But more significant than such aesthetic and tonal differences are the different conditions in the television industry from which each of these shows arose. The two shows come at the beginning (for *7th Heaven*, mid-1990s and early 2000s) and the end (for *Preacher*, the mid-2010s) of a period when religious content in television dramas dramatically expanded. Indeed, the cultural and industrial contexts shifted considerably during the course of the two decades marking each show's premiere. This study focuses on the shifts in these changing industrial and cultural contexts – contexts that made the emergence of a show like *Preacher,* with its cultivation of religious edginess and appeal to quality audiences, not only possible but even logical.

7th Heaven and Rev. Camden arose in an industrial context in which religious content was tied to middlebrow audience expectations and executives' desires to avoid offending viewers.

These middlebrow expectations emerged during the classic network (1955-1985) and neo-network (1985-early 2000s) eras. Subsequently, these assumptions and ideologies continued to affect creatives' programming choices and representational approaches. Religion was a topic largely avoided in creatives' discourse about their work, both within the industry and through the increasingly permeable public spaces of press interviews, social media, and personal interviews. The avoidance of religion in intra- and inter-industry discourse was especially notable for those creatives working in programming aimed at upscale audience niches. This was the case even as religious representations—even representations in dramas aimed at such upscale niche audience members—boomed on television between 2003 and 2016.

Over the course of those thirteen years, this boom in religious representation resulted from substantial shifts in how television was produced and discussed by creatives in interviews and press materials. In spite of such industrial shifts, I argue that religion continued to retain much of the connotations of middlebrow taste and audiences associated with it in earlier eras. These connotations had become solidified in the 1990s, with shows like *7th Heaven* standing as exemplars. This persistent creative sensibility resulted in the creative discourse about religious representation becoming out of sync with its on-screen manifestations. Although during 2003-2016, there were more and more diverse representations of religion on-screen, creatives continued to use a variety of discursive feints to distance themselves from a subject that remained associated with undesirable (middlebrow) audiences and an undesirable middle-American culture. It wasn't until 2015, with a growing number of financing and distribution options arising (e.g., streaming platforms) that space emerged within the industry for both edgier representations of religion and more public acknowledgements of the viability and desire to represent religion by the creative culture of Hollywood television production.

In the course of this project, I undertook interviews with roughly two dozen television writers, producers, executives, and marketers. These individuals had direct knowledge and experience developing prime-time American dramas featuring religious narratives. The subjects interviewed worked on shows that premiered between 2003 and 2016 – the period of the religious representation boom that is the focus of my study. To my surprise, only a few of the individuals that I spoke with requested anonymity. Most of people that I interviewed allowed me to use their names; those who granted consent to be identified by name were primarily creatives who had attained a certain level of status in the television industry. The few individuals who requested anonymity were all staff writers; these lower-level creatives felt they had to be exceptionally careful in terms of what they disclosed due to the greater precariousness of their positions.

Anonymous or not, most of the creatives I spoke to relied on vague abstractions or evidenced outright denial when discussing their use of religious narratives. There was, however, one exception to this pattern of discursive distancing. One anonymous staff writer, who was an outsider to the dominant demographics (white, non-religious, male) of most writers' rooms for prime-time dramas, was especially candid and clear about the dominant ideology within their production culture. This person said they believed there to be a clear "taboo about touching any religion except [when] Muslims [appear] in a bad light."[4] This writer told me they wrote a pilot in the late 2000s that utilized religion but couched it within supernatural genre elements. When it was pitched, this person declared: "My agents' heads exploded."[5] The writer then told me another story about an extremely well-known writer, Aaron Sorkin (*The West Wing*), who pitched a show with this writer's friend a few years ago. Their show had an overtly religious narrative, and when they pitched it to HBO, they didn't even get halfway through their delivery

to the pay-cable channel before executives told them, "We don't touch religion."[6] Just like that, their project was dead.

These anecdotes are dramatic and specific illustrations of a concern regarding the acknowledgement of religion that my study affirms is a constant fear and worry, and a pervasive and persistent avoidance pattern within the television industry during much of the boom period discussed here. As a result of this fear, during the time under examination, creatives have largely sought to distance themselves from their work in religious representation and narratives. In the prime-time religious dramas, such as *Battlestar Galactica* (Sci Fi 2003-2009), *Friday Night Lights* (NBC, 2006-2011), and *Sleepy Hollow* (Fox, 2013-), that are the focus of this study, creatives used a variety of strategies to discuss religion ways that safely contained it—ranging from displacement to outright dismissal in their discourse—so as not to be perceived as religious or middlebrow themselves. This pattern of containment through discourse and representational practice, which was enacted again and again by the creatives with whom I spoke, nuances one of the dominant scholarly and critical conclusions about television in the post-network era: that the changes in technology, distribution, business models, production, and consumption during the last two decades, in the words of Amanda Lotz, have "created opportunities for stories much different from those [possible] in the network era."[7] The possibilities may have been there, but they were consistently contained through textual strategies that allowed for new, more complex modes of religious representation while also creating a context in which they could be downplayed as religious. The religious aspects of those stories, which were part of a matrix of innovative stylistic and narrative elements, were avoided in creative discourse. Instead of heralding these changes in acceptable content regarding religion, creatives avoided the notion of their newness. Only in 2015 and 2016 did creatives begin to shift how they discussed religion as

a subject of their narratives: while certain discursive containment strategies remained, new distribution outlets and a more fragmented media marketplace enabled space for both edgier representations of religion and greater creative acknowledgment of religion. In 2016 there is finally more room for "much different" religious stories and storytelling, but as this dissertation demonstrates, they did not arrive at this point in straightforward manner. Whereas other types of "edge" (such as race, language, and sex) emerged much earlier in television – and were promoted as edgy in marketing and by creators - it took much longer for religion to appear or be talked about as such. This project shows how religious representations shifted from bland, inoffensive preachiness exemplified by *7th Heaven* and its Reverend Camden to diverse, sometimes challenging, and even edgy representational modes as with *Preacher*'s Jesse Custer, even if those representations weren't discussed as religious by creatives working on them until the 2015-2016 season. This project situates these representational and discursive shifts within larger industrial and cultural contexts.

By focusing on a variety of shows featuring religious representations from the neo- and post-network eras, this study explores the shifting parameters within which religion was contained discursively and enabled representationally. It does so by analyzing both how religion has been represented and how executives, producers, and writers who have created and positioned its representation have understood their work with religion. Both the representation of religion and the understanding of it have been affected by production culture ideologies formed through longstanding legacy practices, established genre expectations, and assumptions by creatives about perceived target audiences. Focusing on religious content reveals a pattern of industrial practices and attitudes that have endured for over a decade across a variety of genres and outlets, and that only now, as this study ends in 2016, finally appear to be losing their

position of ideological dominance. The following sections lay the groundwork for understanding the cultural and economic reasons why religion appeared as it did from the classic network era to the post-network era, with a particular focus on the neo-network era as a key transition. As will be illustrated, specific cultural conditions constrained both how the industry both presented and discussed religion. This was the case even as other edgy topics became increasing viable. The gap between religion and these other topics used for marketable edginess relies heavily on the history of religion on television and the various associations that became attached to it from the 1950s through the 1990s.

HISTORIES OF RELIGION ON TELEVISION

Television and Religion in the Classic Network Era (1955-1985)

Religious representation has always been a part of fictional television, albeit rarely. From *The Goldbergs* (CBS, NBC, Mutual, 1949-56) to *The Flying Nun* (ABC, 1967-70) and *The Thorn Birds* (ABC, 1983), visible, overt depictions of religion have appeared throughout television history. Spanning much of the classic network era, these examples appealed to the mass audience that was the main target of the oligopolistic broadcast networks.[8] Due to their centralized control and limited number of competitors, the three networks that dominated the classic network era had little incentive to risk offense by dealing with religion in their programming. Thus, when religion did appear, as in *The Flying Nun*, it was benign, designed to keep the mass audience and the advertisers free from controversy or alienation. As the classic network era came to a close in the 1980s, however, competition between the broadcast networks and emerging cable channels allowed for the networks to take more risks in attempting to lure an increasingly fragmented audience.[9] Thus, *The Thorn Birds*, for example, was a more thorough

and controversial engagement with religious themes and characters as a Catholic priest falls in love with his ward over the course of the melodramatic miniseries.

Television and Religion in the Neo-Network Era (1985-early 2000s)

In the 1980s, the television industry began to manifest the neoliberal market logic that would carry it through the next 20-plus years.[10] Conglomeration, deregulation, and the diffusion of cable contributed to a period of greater content diversity. Michael Curtin refers to this period as the neo-network era to indicate the dialectic of both older network models and newer flexibility and industry adaptation.[11] Curtin describes the neo-network industry structure in relation to target audiences:

> Two tendencies are now at work in the culture industries. One focuses on mass cultural forms aimed at broad national or global markets that demand low involvement and are relatively apolitical. Firms that deal in this arena are cautious about the prospect of intense audience responses either for or against the product they are marketing. By comparison, those forms targeted at niche audiences actively pursue intensity. They seek out audiences that are more likely to be highly invested in a particular form of cultural expression. These firms aim not to change niche groups, but to situate products within them . . . One of the consequences of this new environment is that groups that were at one time oppositional or outside the mainstream have become increasingly attractive to media conglomerates with deep pockets, amities growth objectives, and flexible corporate structures.[12]

In terms of programming strategies, this meant across-the-dial attempts on the part of networks and cable channels to push the envelope to attract an affluent niche audience availed of many choices and thought to be seeking programs that had what Curtin identifies as "edge."[13]

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, television as a medium continued to fracture. As Ien Ang argues:

> The "revolt of the viewer" [in the 1980s], then, is not some sort of romantic eruption of viewers' rebellion on the basis of their "authentic" needs and desires, but is brought to the surface by the very technological changes introduced by the television business itself. Viewers have always already "revolted" by being physically or mentally absent at any time they choose to, but the VCR, the remote control and the multiplication of channels have intensified the opportunities to do so.[14]

Aided by these industrial and technological shifts, television and its perceived audience began more extensively fracturing along taste lines, with cable channels offering niche programming, including sports, children's television, news channels, and religious-only programming. At the same time, audiences were using technology to time-shift or do things with the television set other than watch live television (watch movies, play video games, etc.). The threat of alienating the vestiges of the mass audience without finding an appropriate niche to replace it became even more pronounced as more and more options were presented to them. Moreover, the particularly marketable niches of the television audience were still being fought over by the broadcast and cable channels.

It was at this time in the 1980s that the notion of quality became attached to affluence and elite taste cultures, often called "upscale" by advertisers. The upscale quality audience, according to Joseph Turow, "suggested a large and growing portion of society with a disposable income that represented a marketers' dream."[15] Neo-Network era shows that sought to appeal to these upscale audiences included: *Hill Street Blues* (NBC, 1981-1987), *Northern Exposure* (CBS, 1990-1995), *ER* (NBC, 1994-2009), and *Homicide: Life on the Street* (NBC, 1993-1999). On

neo-network era broadcast television of the 1980s into the early 2000s, controversial subjects such sex, drug use, and violence became increasingly present as part of the appeal to an edgy upscale audience.

Throughout this time frame, though religion remained a minimal topic on commercial TV even as it became a more prominent in wider cultural conversations. The 1980s marked the end of silence for the so-called "Moral Majority," and with it, religion became more prominent culturally. Part of this expansion included the growth of media made by and targeted to evangelical audiences, entertainment that adhered to the moralism of conservative Christians who felt that they were at odds with mainstream media.[16] While the evangelical media industries grew parallel to mainstream media starting in the 1980s, they were not designed to be exclusive. Part of evangelizing is reaching out to religiously witness for Christianity to the wider culture.[17] The religious media culture of the televangelists was fundamental to this shift, spreading their message beyond the boundaries previously separating mainstream and religious media and culture. As Robert Wuthnow explains in *After Heaven*: *Spirituality in America Since the 1950s*:

> Religious leaders who advanced a conservative moral agenda, such as [Jerry] Falwell and [Pat] Robertson, attracted a great deal of media attention in the 1980s, especially when they called on legislative bodies to impose a kind of moral discipline that people themselves seemed incapable of pursuing voluntarily. Capitalizing on Americans' sense of spiritual homelessness, they argued for a return to absolute moral principles, deep faith, and personal discipline in matters of the spirit . . .. Other leaders viewed the 1980s as a time when the moral excesses of the 1960s could be reversed by reasserting traditional values, including closeness to God and a disciplined respect for moral authority.[18]

The evangelical voices of these leaders expanded beyond their televangelical pulpits and into the general public sphere. In translating their religious concerns into political ones, they initiated a cultural moment in which American Christianity became more and more of a topic in general American society, beyond the church and chapel.

Although religion may have gained greater prominence in certain sectors of American culture, on prime-time scripted television, religion was still generally avoided or presented vaguely and minimally, even on quality television. In his analysis of religious representation on *Northern Exposure*, considered a quality drama, Stuart M. Hoover explains the rationale for just such a vagueness when he writes, "The salient images of traditional religion do not hold sway in an era when the authorities that support those images are in decline. A new kind of religion—and a new iconography—must emerge," an iconography of individualistic and new-age spirituality.[19] Horace Newcomb further articulates the logic driving the vagueness of religious representation in the 1980s and 1990s when he writes, "Producers avoid the specifics of belief, the words of faith, and concrete images of the transcendent like the plague. Such specificity could cost them audience. In the meantime, we are given the deeply, powerfully embedded notions of the good that must come from . . . somewhere."[20] Newcomb articulates an assumed sensibility about religion held by creatives in the neo-network era: Religion is risky and thus must be held at a distance. Specificity was perceived as particularly dangerous because it could offend large swaths of the audience who held (or did not hold) that specific belief, a prospect especially germane given the lingering attention to the mass audience at the time.

In the 1980s, overt religion was not considered a marketable audience category. While sex, violence, extreme language, grittier styles, and even racial diversity became markers of differentiation designed to appeal to desirable niche audiences, religion was viewed as likely to

turn off those same viewers.[21] As Joseph Turow argues, "The bulk of distinctions that people from the marketing and media worlds grappled with during the '80s and early '90s revolved around five categories: income, gender, age, race, and ethnicity."[22] Overt Christianity remained mostly relegated to the Christian lifestyle industry that had begun in the 1970s.[23] Mainstream fictional television in the 1980s and through the 1990s did produce a small number of shows with overtly religious content, such as *Highway to Heaven* (NBC, 1984-89) and *Touched by an Angel* (CBS, 1994-2003), but such shows largely relied on a vague set of religious signs and symbols. The most popular trope involved do-gooder angels, which existed without any ostensible connection to a particular religious dogma. Angels as religious content were the basis for both *Highway to Heaven* and *Touched by an Angel*. Chapter one will focus on this moment in the 1990s and examine how the popularity of *Touched by an Angel* and *7th Heaven* (WB, 1996-2007) contributed to a subsequent practice of defining "religious" in terms of these shows. The middlebrow connotations linked to these shows, in turn, contributed to the consequent pattern of creatives avoiding their shows being labeled as religious. During the period from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, when these examples of overtly religiously themed series first appeared, the religious audience (perceived to like middlebrow fare and be less attractive to advertisers) and the quality audience (perceived to favor edgier content and have greater spending power) were largely seen as mutually exclusive by creatives. As mentioned above, Horace Newcomb argues that the specifics of belief in the neo-network era were thought of as risky and alienating; consequently, producers opted instead for vague goodness.[24] In the following era from 2003 to 2016, however, religious representation became more specific, diverse, and prominent due to shifting distribution models and the related fracturing of the audience into smaller, targeted niches.

While *Touched by an Angel* and *Highway to Heaven* presented a vague morality that was implicitly linked to Christianity, another show was more directly associated with the institutional construction of belief and became one of the most well-known mainstream/religious crossover successes on television: *7th Heaven* (WB, 1996-2007). As alluded to above, *7th Heaven* was a teen-oriented melodrama focused on a Protestant minister and his family that was the WB's top program from 1999-2006. At the time of its premiere, the WB was a netlet, reaching a narrower audience through a more limited programming schedule than the traditional broadcast networks. It, like the other young networks of the 1990s, built its success on appealing primarily to a significantly niched audience, i.e., young adults and, for a time, African-American viewers. As a result, the use of religion as a main narrative element of the series presented a much lower risk of alienation of a broad mass audience than *Touched by an Angel* and *Highway to Heaven*. However, even as the show provided the highest ratings among the WB's shows, for years it remained the only series on mainstream television that featured Christianity overtly and distinctly. Indeed, despite its longevity and ratings success, the WB did not develop other shows that shared its religious elements. Although the potential for a religious audience was increasingly visible and relevant for mainstream media from the 1980s through the end of the twentieth century given the rise of the Moral Majority in the wider culture, industry executives and advertisers still did not perceive them as an identifiable or desirable niche for mainstream television. Thus this audience was rarely catered to in mainstream television. Furthermore, the appeal of religiously themed content to a secular audience remained uncertain.

Religious representation and narratives up until the early 2000s remained limited and comprising a small portion of prime-time fictional programming, evident mainly in one-off episodes or addressed with trepidation. Shows explicitly featuring religious content remained

associated with middlebrow tastes and mass-audience oriented practices; they largely sought to avoid any potential controversy in their representation of religion. However, with the September 11th terror attacks, the conditions for representing religion shifted. At this time, of course, religion came into renewed public prominence. In the wake of the attacks there was a revitalization of discourses of Islamic extremism, religious profiling, and the religious rhetoric of the War on Terror. Concurrently, the topic of religion reemerged as a central part of the national conversation not only regarding Islam but also in relation to President George W. Bush's evangelical Christian status and the continued influence of the religious right. As the United States invaded Iraq, *Battlestar Galactica* began airing, marking the beginnings of a boom in religious representation in prime-time American television dramas. *Battlestar Galactica* became the first show to explicitly respond to and engage with religion in the post-network era in a way that moved beyond the middlebrow and mass connotations. Its success and the attention it gained for its approach to religion mark the beginning of the boom.

The Boom in Religious Representation (2003-2016)

As noted above, the occasional appearance of religion prior to the 2000s gave way to a dramatic increase in such programming after 2003. This boom in religious representation, which was due to post-network industrial changes such as the fracturing of the audience and resultant nichification of the television landscape as well as the increased attention to religion in the greater American culture, was characterized by a marked increase in ongoing religious narratives in prime-time dramas. Despite this increase, there were certain types of representation that dominated; following from *Battlestar Galactica,* science fictional and fantastic modes of representation were and continue to be the most prolific. This study traces the way that different means of representing religion emerged over this time span while the way creatives spoke about

that representation continued to be shaped by hesitation until recently. The process of this change is complex, often obscured, not necessarily linear. Significantly, the dramas of the boom were not targeted to religious audiences; in fact, they were primarily aimed at upscale audiences who were considered oppositional to religiousness. The boom spanned several genres—from *Battlestar Galactica, Sleepy Hollow* (Fox 2013-), and *Preacher* among its fantastic (that is, the grouping of fantasy, science fiction, and horror genres) genre examples to *Friday Night Lights* (NBC, 2006-2011) and *Rectify* (SundanceTV, 2013-) as its realist genre examples. It also spanned distribution outlets, appearing on a wide range of broadcast, basic cable, premium, and streaming platforms. Significantly, this boom was never identified in such; indeed, a key goal of this study is to illustrate a pattern of programming that largely went unnoticed by journalists and critics and uncommented on by creatives and executives. The series under discussion here, for the most part, were identified by traits other than religion. Realist dramas were not labeled religious; they merely portrayed an authentic American South that included Christianity. Generically fantastic dramas could use religion as part of a fantasy or science fiction world removed from traditional religious connotations and groupings. The boom extended across generic categorization within dramatic television, spanned thirteen years and each major mode of television distribution, but it was not discussed within the industry or in the wider culture as a boom as diffuse and extensive as all that.

As alluded to above, the boom began with the December 2003 premiere of the SciFi channel's *Battlestar Galactica* three-hour miniseries that would become the first installment of a five-season long drama. The series followed from and reimagined aspects of the original science fiction series of the same name that had aired on ABC from 1978-1979. The twenty-first century version of *Battlestar Galactica* was packaged as a quality science fiction series, dealing

symbolically and allegorically with contemporary political, cultural, and social anxieties through the displaced reality of science fiction. It was praised by critics for its realistic, flawed characters and its critical dialogue with post-9/11 American culture and the War on Terror.[25] The pervasive fear following the 2001 terror attacks had created a culture of paranoia and religious profiling. The year 2003 marked a pointed shift in American foreign policy, with the U.S. government moving from fighting Al-Qaida, the terror organization responsible for the 9/11 terrorist attacks, toward presenting itself as fighting a more generalized definition of terror that included Saddam Hussein in Iraq. These political, cultural, and social anxieties manifested explicitly in shows like *Battlestar Galactica* and *24* (Fox, 2001-2010). Whereas the latter dealt with religion only superficially as it showed America fighting Islamic terrorists, *Battlestar Galactica* dove deeply into the existential questions wrought by a religious war.

In the immediate post-9/11 environment, both within and outside the U.S., there was strong sympathy for, and loyalty to, American culture and foreign policy shifts.[26] In contrast to a growing nationalism evidenced in the wider culture, the media industries began, in 2003, to increasingly question American righteousness and crusading. Much of this was focused on the political sphere, the sense that the War in Iraq was motivated by political and capitalistic reasons more than actual global threat. This questioning was particularly marked among liberal elites like creatives in Hollywood. Although Ronald D. Moore, the showrunner of *Battlestar Galactica*, claimed no direct influence of 9/11 on the development of his show, the climate created following the attacks clearly shaped the series' critical focus on terrorism, torture, insurgency, and military leadership.[27] Moreover, the specifically religious character of the September 11 attacks and subsequent war(s) that followed brought religion—both Islam and Christianity—to

the forefront of American cultural discourse. This is a crucial factor that played a role in the religious representational boom of the 2000s.

Following *Battlestar Galactica*, several other series premiered that featured religious narratives in ways distinct from the 1990s middlebrow mode. *Lost*, a fantasy adventure series that followed the survivors of a plane crash on a mysterious island premiered on ABC in 2004 and ultimately became the show most often compared to *Battlestar Galactica* regarding its religious narrative.[28] *Supernatural* premiered on the WB in 2005 and by the end of the decade displayed among the most overt—and most challenging—representations of Christianity on television. The following year, *Friday Night Lights*, a drama centered on high school football in a small Texas town, premiered on NBC and moved religious representation into a realist genre. Each of these shows serve as case studies of the boom studied in the pages that follow: each was a successful, multi-season show in which religious representation was central to their narratives. Although *Battlestar Galactica* began the boom, each of these mid-2000s shows provided a different shading and approach to their uses of religious representation. These four shows—along with a variety of failures that premiered and disappeared relatively quickly in the 2000s such as *The Book of Daniel* (NBC, 2006), *Eli Stone* (ABC, 2007-2008), and *Kings* (2009)—represent the first wave of the boom, tied to the rise of religious cultural discourse in the wake of 9/11 and launched during the height of the War on Terror. Despite the rise in the broader culture's attention to religion during this period, the subject nonetheless remained a risky one for creatives to be associated with. After all, the main associations that came with religion at the time were a new-millennium crusade in the Middle East and a vocal nationalistic, conservative culture within America.

The end of the decade renewed the centrality of religion in the wider American cultural discourse. This involved the rise of the ultra-conservative and Christian Tea Party movement. This movement became overtly inscribed in culture during the 2010 Midterm election. The Tea Party movement arose following Barack Obama's historic election as President in 2008 and centered on both anti-tax fiscal conservatism and evangelical moralism, with almost half of its members identifying as born-again Christian.[29] Beyond its members' self-proclaimed ideologies and motives, the Tea Party in the early 2010s was strongly associated with racism and white nativism in addition to evangelicalism.[30] The movement was exceptionally visible in the news and within the culture of the time. The rise of the Tea Party engendered a growing discourse of culture wars predicated more on religion and political polarization than on class difference.[31] These culture wars had been ongoing and had been religiously inflected since the rise of the Moral Majority in the 1980s. But throughout that time, television had dealt with the culture wars in different ways (such as using edginess to appeal to the liberal side of the battle) and had generally avoided their religious character in scripted, mainstream dramas. Religiousness in America, in the dominant form of Christianity, had become since the 1980s associated with social conservatism, and the 2010s served to revitalize that association. This cultural construction gave Christian culture a new prominence in America. This construction corresponds to the 2010s acceleration of the boom in religious representation and the premieres of shows that approached religious content in increasingly varied ways: for example, *Sleepy Hollow* (Fox, 2013) featured Ichabod Crane fighting off the Biblical apocalypse, *Rectify* (SundanceTV, 2013-), focused on a man released from death row in Georgia, *The Leftovers* (HBO, 2014-), was a tense drama about the aftermath of a Rapture-like event, *Dominion* (Syfy, 2014-2015) focused on warring angels, the comic book adaptation *Constantine* (NBC, 2014-2015) displayed a demon-fighting occultist,

and procedural *Lucifer* (Fox, 2016-) demonstrated the Devil solving crimes. All of these shows have used Christianity—sometimes even through Biblical literalism—as a foundation for their narratives.

In these shows, as well as in the shows from earlier in the boom, though the religious content featured expands, this expansion corresponds to their creatives' ongoing denial, distancing, and displacement of the term "religion." Throughout the boom, although religion became a main part of the dialogue in the public sphere it often came in close association with social and cultural conservatism, xenophobia, self-righteous nationalism, and hawkish, interventionist foreign policy. Religion thus had associations in the wider public sphere that were polarizing for liberal cultures dominating media production, making acknowledgement of religion potentially dangerous. This dynamic figured into the repeated denial and displacement by creatives and helps explain why the mainstream and trade press for the most part failed to identify this as a tendency. All combined, religion, and religious audiences, were constructed over the span of the boom as something to avoid among the elite, liberal culture of mainstream prime-time Hollywood television production.

During this boom period, and concurrent with these larger cultural and political shifts, the television industry was undergoing its own transformation. As the post-network era began in the early 2000s, for the first time, cable television surpassed broadcast network television in the ratings.[32] As Amanda Lotz argues in *The Television Will Be Revolutionized*:

> Changes in television have forced the production process to evolve during the past twenty years so that the assorted ways we now use television are mirrored in and enabled by greater variation in the ways television is made, financed, and distributed. . .

> Consequently, the industrial transformation of U.S. television has begun to modify what the industry creates.[33]

Distribution outlets, greater reliance on narrow upscale audiences, and shifts in patterns of creative agency all contributed to both the boom in religious content and the precariousness of speaking about the choices involved in its representation. Upscale niche audiences and standards of quality audience targeting were increasingly elevated within the industry. The elevation of the upscale niche audience along with quality audience targeting created conditions favorable to the boom as well as creatives' tendency to displace religion in their discussions of their work within the boom.

In the post-network era, the mass audience has largely yielded to a variety of niches, affecting all aspects of the television industry and creative production from story development to reception. We can consider this process of industrial transformation to be a defining paradigm of twenty-first century media and a key element to understanding how and why religious content began appearing with greater frequency in mainstream television during the 2000s and 2010s. At this time, the risk of incorporating religious representation (at least when ideologically contained, in ways to be addressed throughout), began diminishing, due in large part to the more precise and narrow targeting of upscale niche audiences in the post-network era than had been the case in previous eras. Various new technologies of audience targeting favor upscale audiences and further the post-network era's emphasis on coalitions of upscale audiences over pure ratings or broad demographics.[34]

Once the post-network refinement and expansion of niche strategies were adopted across much of the television industry, the appropriate identification, targeting, and—increasingly—engagement of these desirable audiences became the dominant, popular logic of the industry. As

Napoli notes, "A media environment in which audiences' engagement in, and appreciation of, the content they consume is as valuable (or perhaps even more so) as the size and demographic composition of the audience is one that has the potential to support content forms that resonate powerfully with segments of the media audience that would otherwise be too small to encourage the production of content serving their particular needs and interests."[35] This emphasis on engagement and niche targeting aligns with the increased attention to upscale audiences in both their quality and fan constructions. During this time, in conversation with shifts in the public sphere discussed above, imagined upscale audiences and creatives working in shows pursuing those audiences, construed their viewers as resistant to religious representation in particular ways. As discussed above, the increased attention to these demographic and taste cultures by television industry creatives, executive, and marketers contributed an imagined entity to be pursued. Yet this liberal, affluent, and coastal entity is perceived to be averse to religious content. Such constructions of the audience imaginary by creatives may be influenced by the new technologies and metrics available to measure them in the post-network era. However, as I discovered through the course of my study, a legacy of internal practices and attitudes has had a more obvious impact on when religion is – and is not – depicted in primetime mainstream dramas.

The fractured and increasingly niched audience paradigm of the post-network television industry coincides with rise of new distribution outlets and their shifting models of acquiring and producing television. As Horace Newcomb argues, television in the post-network era "functions [less like the "cultural forum" in the classic network era and more] as a bookstore, a newsstand, or a library. Programs are available for purchase or on 'loan for fee,' as in subscription libraries the predated the modern 'free public library.'"[36] This "logic of publishing" has been pushed

forward by the rise of streaming video on demand (SVOD) outlets like Netflix but has influenced the whole of the television industry.[37] Within the logic of publishing as it shapes television in the post-network era, the quest for prestige—and thus, appeal to upscale audiences who will pay for the content—has become a dominant mode of program branding. In an attempt to attain prestige programming and audiences, studio-financiers and program distribution outlets have had to experiment. Through their experimentation within an industry composed of fractured niches of the audience, there has been a marked rise in the quantity of fictional television production.[38] Beginning in 2015 and continuing to the time of this writing, this rise in productions to fill the multiple niche outlets and content libraries—both in terms of SVOD licensing and of the figurative model of publishing—has yielded what has come to be called Peak TV by some critics, journalists, creatives, and executives.

Peak TV describes the current preponderance of scripted series on television across all outlets, from broadcast networks to streaming platforms. In 2015, the term was coined by FX president, John Landgraf, to describe an industrial context that yielded over four hundred scripted programs that year.[39] Beyond mere quantity, Peak TV is shaping all aspects of the industry, leading to greater experimentation in content that has allowed for a new stage of representing religion. But industrially, the capital going into Peak TV is generally allocated to the top creative talent, as studios and distributors seek to separate their signal from the noise of the 400+ other shows on television. Journalists Josef Adalian and Maria Elana Fernandez explain the market model of Peak TV:

> Overall spending is way up, but like the broader national economy, the wealth isn't being distributed equally. Movie stars are getting offered $5 million to do a single ten-episode season of a show, even as studios slash budgets for lower-level actors. Writers have

plenty of job opportunities, but shorter seasons have meant more career volatility. Experienced showrunners are in high demand, yet they're unlikely to ever become as rich as a Dick Wolf or Norman Lear.[40]

There are shifting notions of creative agency in the era of Peak TV corresponding to the industrial shifts discussed so far. The increased reliance on top-level talent has granted relatively new status for the figure of the showrunner. Concurrently, mid-level job precarity remains, a point especially notable in this study in terms of staff writers. For dramas that feature religious narratives, this means that staff writers, who operate on season-to-season contracts, are beholden to the ideology and culture of the dominant creative voice(s) of the showrunners in the writers' rooms and executive offices. A relatively recent construct within the television industry, the contemporary showrunner takes on the dual roles of head-writer and executive producer. He (usually, he) leads the writers' room by guiding them through creating season-long narrative arcs, assigning writers to scripts, managing outlines and network notes on them, and ultimately being the centripetal and centrifugal force associated with the show. He dominates the space of the writers' room, is the one with enough power to negotiate with the studio and distributor if need be. In addition, he is increasingly the voice for the show with both press and fans. The showrunner gained prominence in the post-network era as a means of managing and elevating a program's brand.[41] The showrunner's voice dominates industry discourse about the show—particularly for upscale dramas—and sets the tone for the culture of the writers' room and the type of audience that will be targeted.

Given the showrunner-staff power dynamic, if a showrunner associated religion with Tea Party conservatives or middlebrow tastes connected to the mass audience, it is likely there will be a production culture in which religion as both a term and a subject is to be avoided. When the

topic is not avoided, it must be contained. Such containment work to clearly distance a creative or show from what are perceived as dominant, adverse cultural discourses about religion. This way of thinking about religion among many television creatives frames the paradoxical relationship between the 2003-2016 boom in religious content and the persistent disavowal of religion among creatives throughout much of this boom.

However, despite the persistent hesitancy that has characterized creatives' discussion of religion in the post-network era, the increased power and individual creative agency for the showrunner figure in the context of Peak TV has also allowed for a gradual shift in that hesitancy of discourse. Although programming has reflected a shift in religious representation since 2003, it is only in the last year or so that creatives—particularly showrunners—have expanded the ways in which they approach and discuss religion's place in their work. For showrunners like Ben Watkins on *Hand of God* (Amazon, 2015-), Steven DeKnight on the first season of *Daredevil* (Netflix, 2015-), and Sam Catlin on *Preacher* (AMC, 2016-), their willingness to discuss, fight for, or frame their stories in terms of religion both in their writers' rooms and the press illustrates a relatively recent change. The creatives working on these shows discuss religion differently than those who discussed the topic in the dozen years before 2015. In their emergent discourse, they push through the legacy of hesitation and distancing, engaging in franker discussions of religion and providing edgier representations of it. Such changes, as will be illustrated in detail in the chapters that follow, have been made possible by the dynamic interplay between cultural and industrial changes since 2003. What's more, these discourses and depictions have been greatly amplified—along with television production more broadly—in 2015.

SCOPE

This dissertation examines how religion as a generalized and abstracted concept has been negotiated by creatives and executives during the post-network era. More specifically, it investigates the conditions and characteristics of what I perceive to be a boom period in the representation of religion in mainstream prime-time American television from 2003 to 2016. From all the shows of this boom period, I have narrowed my focus by applying the parameters outlined below, and arrived at a corpus of fifteen programs. The first four parameters ensure adequate breadth of industrial practices while capturing shows in which religious content was an undeniable production element. The productions defined by these parameters were the shows for which I sought interviews. The fifth parameter was not a component of the programming, but rather a circumstance of the research: it was the shows for which I was granted access via interviews. The five parameters identified in the list that follows are described in greater detail below. The corpus of fifteen programs include programming that:

- Aired initially during (or was conceptualized by streaming platforms as) prime-time series, specifically in the form of hour-long serial dramas, as opposed to daytime or late-night periods;
- Appeared on a variety of distribution outlets including broadcast networks, basic cable, pay cable, and streaming platforms;
- Was not constructed or marketed primarily to religious audiences or audiences of faith;
- Featured Christian-influenced religious narratives for at least one full season;
- Granted me access and interviews with the creatives or executives involved with the projects.

Collectively, these parameters allowed me to recognize and identify how legacy cultural, creative, and business practices cultivated during the twentieth century have continued to inform

post-network era industry structures and norms. The corpus was large, diverse, and spanned a variety of distribution channels. Significantly, across genre, outlet, time, target audience differences, and overtness of representation, a hesitancy in talking about religion *as religion* was prevalent throughout the diverse production cultures. Such hesitation seemingly contradicted the boom in representation of religion. But in fact it was symptomatic of the persistent ideological understanding that creatives have normalized since the mid-1990s: to work on a "religious" show is undesirable within the cultures of production.

The first parameter focused on prime-time serial dramas. Although "prime time" is a term originally associated with specific air times between 7 p.m. and 11 p.m. Eastern, the production practices and programming strategies associated with the term extend beyond the time frame of airing. Over more than half a century, prime-time programming on American television has been the primary daypart during which scripted, dramatic, high-production value programming has aired. Prime time was established as a time when shows that appealed to men returning home from work could enjoy entertainment as a family and later (after children's bedtime) as a time when more adult dramas could air.[42] This was established in opposition to daytime television series meant to appeal to women and children. Historically, daytime television largely has been the realm of religious non-fiction programming including religious services and Pat Robertson's syndicated *The 700 Club* (1966-). These dayparts, and the cultural expectations and programming norms tied to them, though established in the early decades of television, persevere even in the age of DVR time-shifting and watch-whenever streaming programs. Hour-long dramatic shows, even when they don't air at a specific, fixed time, use the same production practices as those that do. The writers' rooms, and the relationship between the producers and

network/distributors remain largely the same. Thus, this parameter functions as a method of addressing the norms within the constructed norm of television: prime time.

The second parameter is the condition that the shows air from a variety of distribution platforms. The series I focus on span all of the major means of first-run television distribution for American prime time programming: broadcast, basic cable, pay cable, and streaming. Each distribution outlet carries with it specific prospects in terms of content which are based on such factors as viewer expectations, ease of access, assumptions about audience, regulatory classifications and traditions, and the channel's brand identity.[43] Broadcast television, including the networks ABC, NBC, CBS, Fox, the CW, and a few smaller networks such as Ion (formerly Pax-TV) and MeTV, still serves as the "most mass" medium, reaching the largest number of American television viewers. Though primarily reliant on advertising revenue to make money, additional revenues are derived from ownership following the repeal of the fin/syn rules as well as retransmission consent fees paid by multichannel video programming distributors (MVPDs). Cable television augments advertising fees with subscription fees paid to the MVPDs which then pay to license the cable channels. This, along with cable's more relaxed regulatory classification, diminishes the role advertisers play in shaping cable's content compared to broadcast. Within the cable economy, premium cable channels such as HBO have no advertiser revenue, granting them even more leeway in terms of content, and streaming channels also operate largely in this advertiser-free model. From these differences, a set of norms for handling controversial subjects like sex and violence has appeared. These norms generally favor cable over broadcast modes of representation: using controversy to construct marketable edge and brand distinction. However, religious representation illuminates little difference across distribution outlets nor does religion

follow the path laid by representations of other controversial subjects on television. It remains unique.

Although there are exceptions, particularly for programs that air in the 10 p.m. Eastern "safe harbor" time slot provided for more adult dramas after children have gone to sleep, the dominant perception by viewers, regulators, and critics is that broadcast television is or should be safer and thus less willing to take risks in storytelling and representation than cable, satellite, pay-cable, or streaming. Broadcast still is considered by many creatives as more beholden to mass audience tastes, while cable is seen as able to be more oriented toward specific, tailored niches. Such a binary is constructed through years of cable marketing practices that have used the comparison to further their market distinction. There are exceptions to this imaginary, but the idea that quality television airs on broadcast *despite* its outlet largely persists within the industry. When these assumptions are applied to dramatic series via popular and critical discourse, broadcast becomes the place for middlebrow entertainment, "something blandly conventional, lacking either refined distinction or raw energy."[44] Cable, in contrast, becomes a place for edgy and quality fare. This binary distinction has increasingly become the case over the course of this study as the idea of the upscale audience has more quickly and surely moved away from broadcast in the last thirteen years. Outlets that are wholly removed from advertiser influence leverage their distinction from broadcast with their channel branding. Thus, outlets like HBO and Netflix situate much of their brand within their cultivated assumptions that the television dramas they distribute are always already quality television.

The third parameter is that the shows are not targeted to a specifically religious audience. Within this study, I focus on dramas produced within what is considered normal for television production cultures. Significantly, the mainstream religious programming that is the focus of my

study is markedly different from religiously oriented programming. Such programming, targeted more specifically to communities of (Christian) faith, has been available on a range of outlets for some time. It has also been the site of most existing scholarly analysis of religion on TV. For example, there are cable channels that explicitly and implicitly target religious viewers as part of their brand; these include UP (formerly the Gospel Music Channel) and the Hallmark Channel, launched as their current iterations in 2004 and 2001, respectively. Additionally, there is a parallel media industry sector produced by and for evangelical Christians. Media scholar Heather Hendershot addressed this evangelical media industry in *Shaking the World for Jesus*, where she situates these overtly Christian media cultures in opposition to secular culture in the 1990s and early 2000s. She writes, "The mass culture industry is 'conservative,' then, insofar as it preserves the status quo by rejecting didactic Christian media out of hand."[45] This project builds on Hendershot's work by considering how the mass culture industry's dismissal of "didactic Christian media" affects how it approaches even the concept of religion in the most abstract terms for contemporary prime-time television. As a way to distinguish the programs, production cultures, and distribution channels I study from the faith-based channels and industries addressed by Hendershot, I often use the term mainstream to describe non-faith-based television that does not target religious audiences. It is worth noting that mainstream does *not* mean middlebrow in this study. Instead, the term is meant to imply that which is considered normal television in a culture in which religion is perceived as ideologically and culturally risky for those writing, producing, and marketing prime-time TV.

To narrow this study from simply broadly surveying the myriad dramatic programs that have featured religious characters or episodic religious story arcs during the 2000s, I have chosen to focus primarily on series with at least season-long religious narratives. I am using religious to

indicate hegemonic American religion, Christianity, as the normalized and "normal" cultural sense of religion. These representations can range from vague to overt, but they are all framed by Christianity regarding their religiousness. Other faiths or faith sects—Judaism, Islam, Mormonism, and Hinduism—are still presented as other. They are outside of the bounds of normal or normative religion; they are too specific to be normalized. In a similar but more extreme vein, cults and other obviously deviant modes of religion are excluded because they are too clearly othered to present a threat to hegemonic religious ideology. Within this parameter, the potential threat to (and of) dominant religion, its adherents, its ideology, and its cultural presence was a significant factor in choosing the shows for this corpus. Beyond the religiousness of the representation, the fact that such representation occurs over at least a full season narrative further buttresses the potential threat of religion, so it too is a key element in this parameter.

Season-long narratives that feature religious tropes or characters as part of the driving force of their narrative require sustained commitment by creatives and executives within the process of making the show. In contemporary television's serial narratives, the season-long story is decided upon by the writers, producers, and executives well before any episodes begin airing. Breaking the season-long arc is often the first step in a writers' room each season; this act then affects each task, outline, and script that is written for producers and executives to vet.[46] Thus, if the religious narrative *does* alienate the audience or make advertisers wary, there is very little that can be done after the initial episodes featuring that narrative begin to air. The risk for the executives is heightened. Although religious narratives and even whole show premises focused on religion are on the rise, they require the production teams involved in their creation to engage in an extended negotiation regarding acceptability. In the process of such negotiation, patterns of containment emerge. These patterns allow writers to construct their work with regard to religion

without appearing religious themselves or being grouped with middlebrow entertainment. Such is the fear associated with religion in Hollywood.

The final limitation on the scope of research is a purely practical one: my case studies are all programs for which I had contact with at least one individual who worked in the creative team for that show as either a writer, a producer, an executive, or a marketer. The only exception is *Lucifer,* for which I was unable to schedule an interview with a creative before the writing of this dissertation. While the interviews I conducted rarely reached the level of candor of the anonymous writer I discussed above provided, they nonetheless reveal how religion is negotiated by the various stakeholders involved in production and distribution. My interviews are supplemented by publicly disclosed interviews in the popular and trade press, but the interviews I conducted, particularly with staff writers, revealed more about the quotidian negotiation or religion in television storytelling.[47] When talking with creatives working on shows that engage in a sustained presentation of religion, the persistence of the religious avoidance could be heard in the audible hesitation, the choice of words like "spirituality" or "metaphysical" in response to a question that uses the word "religion," and the ways in which religion undergirded discussions but was not acknowledged. That source for my research is necessary to better understand how creatives represent religion on television. Even with this parameter, my study crosses two decades of content from a variety of platforms.

With these broad parameters, I arrived at a corpus of possible shows for my research. These shows are not the only ones I could have drawn from. Instead, they indicate a larger pattern of programming during the period of the religious representation boom. From individuals working within the shows included in this corpus, I completed twenty-one phone interviews and three interviews via email correspondence. These interviews resulted in fifteen programs as case

studies, organized into thematic groupings of two to three shows per chapter. Even within this expansive framework, there are many shows that did not fit the scope of this study except as brief mentions (or some not at all). These shows include notable failures such as *The Book of Daniel* (NBC, 2006), *John from Cincinnati* (HBO, 2007), *Kings* (NBC, 2009), *Believe* (NBC, 2014), and *Of Kings and Prophets* (ABC, 2016). There were also a few examples that potentially straddle the line between religious and fantastic premises such as *Joan of Arcadia* (CBS, 2003-2005), *Eli Stone* (ABC, 2008-2009), and *Resurrection* (ABC, 2014-2015). In addition to my fairly large corpus and grouping of case studies, there are still many more than a handful of other dramatic programs that could fit the scope. Among those are shows I did not get interviews for or could not place within this dissertation, but their omnipresence further supports the necessity of studying this boom in programming with religious themes. The case studies used in this dissertation represent a snapshot of this larger pattern, and the observations and conclusions drawn from their study can be further expanded and complemented by further study, a point I will return to in my concluding chapter.

Although this dissertation starts by examining how the 1990s served as a key turning point in the representation of religion – and religion's positioning within the television industry – the majority of these case studies, and the main thrust of my analysis, is focused on the cultural, industrial, and ideological dimensions of religious programming produced during the boom period beginning with Sci Fi's *Battlestar Galactica* miniseries-turned-pilot in 2003 and continuing through the launch of *Preacher* on AMC in mid-2016. Within the television industry, examined within the parameters noted above, I found that contemporary storytelling and representational practices largely perpetuate the same ideologies and learned behaviors of past classic network and neo-network eras (1950s-1990s) when dealing with one of the few

remaining subjects creatives seemed to view as a taboo for Hollywood: religion. Such caution across diverse platforms is in contrast to how creatives and executives engage with other abstracted controversial concepts such as sex, violence, and language. Moreover, the shift in creative discourse about religion has lagged behind both its own representation and the patterns established by other controversial concepts. It is only in the last few years that both the representation *and* discourse about religion in prime-time dramas has approached the modes established for other edgy topics in the post-network era.

KEY FRAMES AND SCHOLARLY INTERVENTIONS

Historically, studies of religion on television have been undertaken primarily by scholars based in sociology, religious studies, and mass communication. In contrast, I use television studies at the overarching theoretical framework for structuring my research. Within this broad framework, I apply media industry studies and its subfield of cultural studies of production as a secondary frame and as methodological foundations. My third and final framework uses religious studies theories of religious tropes and postmodern religion, and specifically post-Christianity, as a way to ground my understanding of how the television industry negotiates religion in the abstract. By virtue of this approach, my project intervenes in the field of television studies in a number of ways. First, it contributes to the small but growing body of literature approaching religion on television from a television studies framework. Second, by addressing how religion figures as an anomaly within debates and assumptions about quality television discourses, it continues the ongoing engagement by television studies scholars in issues of cultural power and taste formations. Third, it attends to media industry studies' attention to the television industry and its evolving practices in an age of industrial, cultural, and technological

convergence. This involves considering how legacy practices shape and are shaped by negotiated ideologies both within the texts and in the cultures that produce them. Fourth and finally, it traces representations of religion as they move through post-Christian cultures in the creative industries and away from function-based definition of religion toward abstraction.

Television Studies in the Post-Network Era

As noted above, there are only a few television studies scholars who have previously studied religion on television. Prominent among them are Heather Hendershot in *Shaking the World for Jesus*; Jorie Lagerwey with *Are you there God? It's me, TV*; the authors assembled in the edited collection *Small Screen, Big Picture*; and Matt Hills in his article, "Media Fandom, Neoreligiosity, and (Cult)ural Studies." These scholars look at religion across a range of approaches and subjects, focusing on religion in television as it functions for religious practitioners. These practitioners might be working in the evangelical media industries, as in Hendershot's study, or merely enacting religious functions through their fan practices as in Hills' article. For these scholars, religion, or at least religiosity, is mostly acknowledged as such in their research. My study contributes to this small but growing literature by analyzing religion on television as a set of representational practices and themes in line with these earlier studies but with one significant complicating factor: television creatives' denial that they are representing *religion*. Examining religion within this industrial context and in relation to mainstream television production across a variety of platforms and genres enables a deep and broad study of this pattern of creative denial as a strategy for making religion safe within the context of television production ideologies. This study analyzes religion within the power dynamics at play within both the television text and the television industry, attending to the ways that symbolic capital within the industry alters how creatives at different levels talk about their work with

religion. Moreover, its breadth and depth across genres and modes of representation manifests the assumptions about target audiences that construct upscale in opposition to religious. The ongoing quest to appeal to upscale and quality audiences actually contributes to the further entrenchment of the legacy of older production practices and conservative content possibilities in the case of religion.

Greatly influenced by cultural studies, television studies focuses on medium-specific understandings of power structures and norms as well as the industrial, political, cultural, technological, and/or reception-oriented discourses that shape and are shaped by those power structures. As Jonathan Gray and Amanda D. Lotz conclude in their introduction to the field:

> We've argued that television studies is distinguished from studies of television primarily by a concern for context and breadth; that television studies may at times focus primarily on only one of the triumvirate of institutions, programs, and audiences, but that it will always at least be mindful of, open to, and acknowledge the context provided by the other two and by any number of other contexts.[48]

One of the virtues of television studies is its cultural studies foundation that builds to the multi-site attention for analysis that Lotz and Gray identify. Television studies, in its concern for context and breadth, is appropriate as a theoretical and methodological framework for studies of religion, yet such studies are nonetheless still rare.

One of the few television studies approaches to religious representation in mainstream television is Lagerwey's 2009 dissertation, *Are you there God? It's me, TV: Religion in American TV Drama, 2000-2009*. In this project, Lagerwey studies the representational politics of religion on television as well as religion's intersection with genre, gender, race, and celebrity. Lagerwey contextualizes and analyzes religious representation in early twenty-first century

America, but she also acknowledges that her study is a step toward a larger, more robust television studies literature about religion and television. She concludes her dissertation by calling explicitly for greater conversation between text and production, writing, "The representational analysis here would also benefit from dialogue with the emerging field of Production Studies within Media Studies scholarship."[49] This dissertation contributes to the dialogue she calls for.

Television Genres

Part of utilizing a television studies frame in this study includes an engagement with television genre theory. As John Fiske argued, "Genre is a cultural practice that attempts to structure some order into the wide range of texts and meanings that circulate in our culture for the convenience of both producers and audiences . . . Television is a highly 'generic' medium with comparatively few one-off programs falling outside established generic categories."[50] Continuing in that line of thought, Jason Mittell argues that it is most useful to "conceive of genres as *discursive* practices. By regarding genres as property and function of discourse, we are able to examine the ways in which various forms of communication work to constitute generic definitions and meanings."[51] Within the cultural practices that structure and categorize television programs into genres, industry and viewer literacy rests on shared genre expectations. While no genre category, especially on television, is fixed or stable, genre operates within the realm of consensus. For genres ranging from realist (such as *Friday Night Lights*) to fantastic (such as *Supernatural*), these expectations include character types, aesthetics, poetics, story types, production strategies, and assumptions about audience. My study crosses both realist and fantastic television genres, and therefore engages with both genres' relationships with quality television demarcations, as well as with strategies whereby creatives are protected from the risk

regarding religion as it is perceived within that specific genre. Both realist genres and fantastic genres necessitate different approaches to representing religion and how that representation is understood by creatives.

Realist genres have a greater propensity for representation deemed authentic, which contributes to realist dramas' associations with quality television. Steve Neale remarked on the realist versus non-realist distinction in film genres, writing: "The predominance of ideologies of realism in our culture tends to mean that, unless marked as high art, many avowedly non-realist genres are viewed as frivolously escapist, as 'mere fantasy', and thus as suitable only for children or for 'mindless', 'irresponsible' adults."[52] Neale discussed the ways that realist and fantastic genres have been set in binary opposition of each other, and realism generally—at least the realism that is constructed as a key tenet of "high art" or "quality" media—is defined in opposition. In their study of the methods of legitimating television, Michael Z. Newman and Elana Levine argue, "Much of what we identify as quality, complex, and sophisticated in American television since at least the 1980s achieves that status in part through its ability to mark itself off from soap opera."[53] Although they focus on the gendered aspects of this binary in television dramas, the naturalization of realism in the discursive category of quality drama in American television operates in opposition to non-realist genres, such as fantasy and science fiction, and their cultural denigration that Neale points out.

Fantastic genres may represent realistic elements in character development or writing, albeit within the unreal narrative worlds of fantasy, science fiction, and horror. This creates a double vision of sorts for fantastic representation, especially for controversial subjects like religion. Fantastic programs can represent difficult subjects with intense focus while also allowing for these subjects to be dismissed as part of the unreal of the fantastic. Catherine

Johnson in her study of this genre grouping from *Star Trek* (NBC, 1966-1969) to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (WB, 1996-2003) argues, "One of the characteristics of studies of non-verisimilitudinous [i.e., fantastic] genres is that fantasy is seen to have subversive potential because it represents the 'unreal.'"[54] The unreality represented in the fantastic genres of fantasy, science fiction, and horror helps to make this subversive potential safe for viewers and creatives alike.

Both realist genres and fantastic genres construct particular upscale audience imaginaries that prominent programming and its marketers increasingly attempt to target. As discussed above, realist genres have historical and cultural connections to quality dramas. Realist genres have no unreality to overcome in order to attain quality labels and such labels are mostly associated with realist genres. This tautological loop aligns realist genres with the idea of quality audiences as they have been generally constructed since the 1970s: affluent, coastal, (nonreligious,) white elites. Shows such as *The Sopranos* (HBO, 1999-2007)*, Breaking Bad* (AMC, 2008-2013), *Friday Night Lights* (NBC, 2006-2011), and *Rectify* (Sundance TV 2013-) gain awards, accolades, and critical attention as quality television in this realist mode.[55] When fantastic genre dramas such as *Battlestar Galactica, Lost* (ABC, 2004-2010)*, Game of Thrones* (HBO, 2011-), and *The Leftovers* (HBO, 2014-) gain similar attention as quality television, the accolades are often positioned as occurring *despite* the shows' fantastic genres.[56] But the quality audience is not the only notable upscale audience being targeted in the post-network era. The fan audience for fantastic genre shows has been gaining prominence for decades as a devoted viewer base with money to spend. However, in the post-network era, according to scholar Matt Hills, fans now "make up the entirety of a niche audience" with the attendant cultural power.[57] Moreover, the practices of fan audiences are becoming increasingly mainstream and are

particularly visible to marketers, advertisers, executives, and creatives as (anecdotal) proof of audience engagement with a show and/or its brand.[58] Each upscale audience imaginary—quality or fan—coincides with the broad generic categories of realist and fantastic, respectively, but they overlap significantly in terms of class, race, region, gender, and their supposed non-religiousness. To target a program to either audience is to target an upscale niche.

Just as television studies in its early years as a field sought to do for television generally, a television studies framework provides nuance as well as a challenge to top-down notions of power in culture. This power is commonly articulated in notions of quality television and the ability to attract upscale audiences. Those who are targeted by the television industry hold a degree of power. A television studies framework makes visible the negotiation of meaning by foregrounding the polysemy of the text for both cultural producers and viewers, and it helps to understand the interpellation of certain publics that are constructed by industry creatives and executives as particular audience imaginaries. All of these goals of the field are both inherent in television studies and are renewed in their vitality and impact by focusing their lens on religion within the television industry, which, as a function of its understudied nature, can provide new understandings about American culture, industry, power and a medium in transition.

Quality Television

Within this study, quality audiences act as the paragon of upscale target audiences to which many of the post-network case studies are appealing, but they have been constructed within the industry as oppositional to religion. Thus, the imaginary of the quality audience—and upscale audiences more generally—is one of the key factors assumed by prime-time production cultures to require religion be contained in both practice and representation.

One of the ongoing debates in television studies concerns the fraught category of quality television programming. Quality television is a term generally accepted and employed among critics, viewers, and some parts of the television industry. As used by these different stakeholders, the term is meant to indicate perceptions of "good" television in largely formal-aesthetic terms. John Caldwell examined the stylistic shifts toward cinematic forms on broadcast television in the 1980s, coining the term "televisuality."[59] Jason Mittell has recently written about "complex television" citing narrative, aesthetics, and authorial practices cohering to form quality television.[60] For dramas, the evaluation of quality currently implies cinematic aesthetics, complex characters, serial narrative structures, high production values, and often realist genres.[61] Many critics and scholars trace the current iteration of quality television to HBO's positioning of *The Sopranos* (1999-2007) as the foundation of its quality brand.[62] Television scholar Deborah L. Jaramillo argues that *The Sopranos*' quality designation originated from HBO's "It's not TV, it's HBO" promotional strategy in the late 1990s. She writes (echoing points made in the section above): "This pay cable chauvinism not only holds broadcast TV to a different standard but also implies that pay cable consumers can handle graphic language, sex, and violence in a more thoughtful and productive way than broadcast viewers."[63] This mentality that helped to situate *The Sopranos* as the paragon of current quality drama implies a host of cultural assumptions about audience, taste, and affluence. These assumptions continue to shape what shows are discussed as quality, such as *The Wire* (HBO, 2002-2008), *Breaking Bad* (AMC, 2008-2013), *Mad Men* (AMC, 2007-2015), and *Game of Thrones* (HBO, 2011-). The deployment of this term raises some larger questions about how quality television is positioned and understood within contemporary television studies.

Quality television is generally understood as different from, and thus better than, regular television. The distinction constructs a raced, classed, and gendered hierarchy of power and taste. As Newman and Levine argue, "TV becomes respectable through the elevation of one concept of the medium at the expense of the other."[64] This binary is the crux of many television studies scholars' skepticism about discourses of quality television as employed by many critics, viewers, and industry figures. The quality designation denigrates normal television as less-than while it elevates select series that adhere to a particular elite and empowered taste culture. Programs and genres that fall outside of the quality designation tend to be those that have historically appealed to women, minorities, and the working-class. Quality, in its separateness from regular television, also operates counter to middlebrow tastes. One implication of this binary is that quality television is a space for narrative and representational risk-taking.

As Jaramillo describes above, the quality audience is presumed to be better equipped to handle challenging subject matter. This project's study of religion complicates such presumptions. The quality audience, in the case of dramatic series featuring religious topics, is assumed to be oppositional to religion as a subject. According to my interviewees, this imagined audience is, in fact, seen as *less* equipped to interpret religion within a dramatic narrative than are middlebrow audiences. Shows constructed or perceived as quality by industry executives and creatives often seek to protect upscale viewers from religion, even as a mere abstraction. For example, when religion is represented in quality fantastic dramas, such as *Lost* and *Battlestar Galactica*, Christian themes and characters are discussed as spirituality but are not acknowledged as religion, indicating a post-Christian understanding of religion marked by both presence and denial. As this example illustrates, this study complicates debates about quality television, illustrating how the proclamations of greater textual possibilities in the post-network era have

limits – and these limits come in terms of when and how religion can appear in edgy or quality content. This study is relevant and contributes not only to television studies generally, but raises important issues about genre in relation to audience and about fundamental notions of quality television.

Media Industry Studies and Cultural Studies of Production

With its research focus on practices within a specific group of Hollywood production cultures, this study applies media industry studies and its subfield, production studies, to identify power dynamics and the struggles over the creation of cultural meanings. Media industry studies provides useful context, approaches, and methods for studying and understanding these production cultures. Many prior industry studies, including Michael Curtin's "On Edge" and Ron Becker's "Prime-Time Television in the Gay Nineties," have examined how controversial subjects or niche audiences have been pursued with edgy content.[65] Yet religion on TV complicates such studies and their claims about how edginess is always a logical or necessary strategy in pursuing niche audiences.

Media industry studies also investigate differences in programming strategies and production practices to draw conclusions about using difference for gaining market position. Industry studies that look at television from the 1980s forward tend to find sites of difference as contributing to edginess as both textual and marketing strategies. This strategy played out on Fox in the early 1990s as the new network targeted African-American viewers and used racial diversity to help build its brand.[66] Where race, sex, violence, and an array of potentially controversial representations have long histories of being exploited by marketers, religion has not similarly been exploited. Instead of using religion to cultivate edge in the post-network era, as this study illustrates, religion is continually avoided, disavowed, and contained, at least for the

first dozen years of the boom. Only in 2015-2016 did television creatives and executives shift, in some cases, to direct engagement via edginess.

This shift, spearheaded by showrunners in 2015-2016 indicates the continued cultural sway creatives have to cultural discourses. Although viewers wield their own power in meaning making, Pierre Bourdieu rightly points to cultural producers as more significant sites of cultural power. In *The Field of Cultural Production*, he writes, "The fact remains that the cultural producers are able to use the power conferred on them, especially in periods of crisis, by their capacity to put forward a critical definition of the social world, to mobilize the potential strength of the dominated classes and subvert the order prevailing [in] the field of power."[67] Creatives have the power to shape, reflect, and contain culture through their representations of the social world. As noted in the passage drawn from Lotz and Gray above, television studies includes a focus on industry and production as one of its three major sites of analysis. Significantly, there are not yet any production studies that focus specifically on religion in mainstream American television. Those studies that do take religious discourses as objects of analysis often do so by analyzing either texts or audiences. Heather Hendershot's *Shaking the World for Jesus* is the only notable industries-oriented study of religion, but as noted above, she focuses exclusively on evangelical Christian media. Although there are many ways to study the presence of religion on television, a focus on the production and circulation of religious discourses in mainstream television requires understanding and analyzing the various codes that such discourses and narratives pass through in order to be palatable to the commercial television industry. It is within the wider television industry and through on-the-ground production cultures of television shows that these codes are created.

Cultural studies of production usefully foreground the movement between meanings and practices at the level of the television series as well as at the wider industrial level. The production studies approach highlights workers' reflexivity within the industry at both micro- and macro-levels of understanding, allowing for discussions of individual work and agency as situated within wider industry-level trends and constraints. As Caldwell argues,

> Reflexivity operates as a creative process involving human agency and critical competence at the local cultural level as much as a discursive process establishing power at the broader social level. This mutual alignment may give film and television entertainment much of its resilience, since the alliance synthesizes the gratifications of human creative resistance with the excessive profitability of new forms of conglomeration.[68]

Where television studies has so often brought human agency into its field for the study of the audience, by marrying television studies and production studies, it is possible to ensure that the element of human agency on the production side does not get ignored. Although I also include broader industrial concerns such as marketing and branding within my analysis, production studies' particular reliance on interviews as well as on publicly disclosed "deep texts" helps to ensure that individual agency maintains a central place in my study. This is especially important for studies of religion in culture because religion is often seen as an intensely personal practice and/or identity marker.[69]

Through its focus on religion as a potentially contentious subject, this study builds on and updates the industry-wide approach taken by Todd Gitlin's *Inside Prime Time,* a television production study. In her examination of Gitlin's ongoing impact on industry studies, Amanda Lotz argues that his model persists even as its particulars have changed. She uses *Inside Prime-*

Time as a guide to industry-level studies that can still be helpful in examining the broad scope of television production. That is, "the dynamic connections of the whole" illustrate the ways that various production cultures interact and create patterns to help us understand the breadth of the industry.[70] She describes twenty-first century television as facing "significant adjustment in industry structure [that] decreased the importance of any one network . . . Networks were not leading the way into the new era, rather television was being redefined by technologies, distribution possibilities, advertising practices, and audience behavior."[71]

In her own book, *The Television Will Be Revolutionized*, Lotz ultimately argues that these industrial changes have created new openings for textual possibilities on television.[72] For Lotz, Gitlin, and many other media industry scholars exploring moments of industry-wide change, their attention to each site of shifting norms helps to provide a greater context for my own industry-wide study. I build on their foundation by examining one subject, religion, as it moves through what is considered mainstream within the television industry, prime-time dramatic production. In studying this one subject, the conclusions Gitlin and Lotz drew about prime-time production and its purveyance of textual possibilities becomes complicated. Religion is not used to "hook" viewers like liberal topics were used in the 1970s, nor does religion fit the sense of openness industry and scholarly discourses perpetuate regarding the post-network era.

Religious Studies and Post-Christianity

An additional focus of this project is on how Hollywood production cultures employ "post-Christian sensibilities" in creating and distributing programming. By post-Christian, I mean a general turn away from Christianity in Western cultures that formerly were structured around Christendom, as conceived by Jean-Luc Nancy and Rudolph Binion. This concept is related to but distinct from the foregrounding of religion in the culture wars discussed above. The

rise of the evangelical right is in some ways a reaction to the rise of a post-Christian sensibility in American culture. However, post-Christianity is not merely the decrease in Christian adherents and the increase in atheism or agnosticism. In addition to the turn away from Christendom as the dominant structuring system of culture, a post-Christian sensibility illustrates a normalizing of Christian tropes in a culture seen as increasingly non-Christian. Hence, the simultaneous loss of Christian adherents. One manifestation of this turn is recent Pew research that notes the rise of those who claim they don't practice any particular religion in the United States.[73] This demographic shift coincides with a downturn in individuals belonging to white Christian denominations. Non-affiliation doesn't mean that these Americans aren't spiritual or religious in a broader sense, and in fact, more than two-thirds of the "unaffiliated" say they believe in God.[74] The non-affiliation of the so-called "nones" is overwhelmingly skewed toward white liberals under 30 years old, which, significantly, is a key part of the target demographic of many television dramas discussed in this study.[75] The alignment between target media demographics and non-affiliation may account for the rise in a post-Christian sensibility in the Hollywood television industry.

One of the ironies of the post-Christian sensibility is that Christianity is more represented than ever on television not aimed at the dwindling Christian population, as evident in the current boom of religious programming investigated in this study. A simultaneous denial and renewal of religion is one of the foundational ideas of post-Christian theory. Cultural theorist Jean-Luc Nancy wrote of this phenomenon in "The Deconstruction of Christianity":

> Insofar as the so-called modern world is constructed, and not by chance, on an internal denial of its Christian frame of reference, this denial is a serious one, precluding the modern world's beginning to understand itself. . . it can be read in two ways: as a sort of

> denial or repression of the Christian frame of reference and, *at the same time*, as a complete and utter renewal of such a reference.[76]

That is, post-Christianity's key paradox is that it requires both the denial of and continued presence of Christianity within the social sphere. That paradox also positions it well within the dominant non-Christian culture of Hollywood. Post-Christianity theorists like Nancy and Rudolph Binion argue that living within a cultural environment in which Christianity is a key meta-narrative of the culture, even if it is framed as historical or predominantly attached to a conservative "other," indicates an alacrity of understanding and legibility for Christianity that persists beyond its belief system and adherents. For the purposes of this study, a post-Christian sensibility helps to underscore the abstraction of religion within Hollywood television production cultures. In a post-Christian sensibility, understanding religious representation as somehow non-religious denies the Christian framework in which the religious representational tropes are operating, while granting greater usage of those tropes. The denial makes it safe, and that safety allows for more representation. It creates a feedback loop predicated on the fundamental shared understanding that Christian tropes, when used as pure entertainment, are no longer Christian. It is a naturalized ideology within the television production cultures of this study, a hegemony that creatives see as fact, not a construction through learned behaviors.

Moreover, this post-Christian ideology works well within the commercial system of the television industry as it is evolving with diverse stakeholders and greater complexity and output than ever. In such a culture which is non-Christian and associates Christianity with an adverse conservative and middlebrow taste culture, post-Christianity allows for creatives to both have their cake and eat it too. It allows for the exploitation of familiar stories and characters that are within the public domain while also inoculating the industry from alienating their target

audiences. Christian tropes are known, recognizable. Lucifer and the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, for example, are familiar stories and characters even to people who grew up in or believe in other religious systems within the American cultural milieu. Thinking of the Hollywood television industry as operating within a post-Christian sensibility helps us to understand why so many creative workers within the industry – including many that I interviewed – did not consider Biblical books, apocalyptic angel warfare, the Devil, or prophetic visions religious. As another post-Christian theorist, Rudolph Binion, asserts, "However it is sampled, post-Christian culture shows the same tendency [as Christendom] to pick up and work over the pieces of the old Christian experience."[77] As long as these pieces are abstracted within the production culture to the point of being non-religious, they are both commercially useful and ideologically safe.

The post-Christian separation of religious stories from their religious referents is a further example of storytelling in late capitalism. The severance of the signifier from the signified is a textbook example of postmodern pastiche from Fredric Jameson's "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism." But angels and the four horseman of the apocalypse are not the same as Van Gogh's peasant shoes, as the former carry a greater potential for value-laden meanings for (Christian) viewers. The movement away from the religious function for these clearly Biblical and Christian signifiers is of a different kind than general cultural signifiers such as political art becoming middlebrow art, as it was with the Van Gogh work Jamison discusses. Ostensibly, the fact that so many producers no longer see these stories and tropes as religious indicates this basic postmodernism, but I argue that there is something more going on here. Religion, as it is experienced, categorized, and studied, is often described as separate from other

elements of culture, of its own kind. It interacts with, and for, individuals of belief, and shapes the wider world.

The fundamental distinction between sacred and profane, as espoused by Emile Durkheim, remains a key way of understanding Christian American culture.[78] Defining the profane in relation to the sacred, both categories are perpetually negotiated as culture and belief mutually affect each other.[79] We can see this in the desire for many American Christians to bring the sacred into the profane, to activate the sacred in the profane through "witnessing" and other evangelical practices.[80] The desire to find Christianity in all aspects of life is a sustaining one for many evangelicals and even for less fervent Christian communities. However, in mainstream television production cultures, the desire to *not* articulate Christianity as such in even its overt representation dominates. Religious representation does not correspond to religious belief, but the fear that it does creates creative environments in which religion is both present and denied. The shows that act as case studies in this dissertation are not targeting Christian audiences but rather they are shaped by decades of cultural integration that made Christian culture interchangeable with American culture. Yet this is true only insofar as the latter, American culture, overwrites the former, Christian culture. For example, angels become American mythology and Bible stories figure as a central part of American culture. Neither is overtly acknowledged as Christian-religious, but rather represented as merely American-cultural. Within the context of a post-Christian sensibility, identifying where religion is denied can be telling. Thus, this study contributes to religious studies concerns about post-Christian cultural expression and the life of religious tropes outside of their religious functions. Moreover, this project belongs within the small but growing body research at the intersection of religious studies, television studies, and industry studies.

METHODS AND SOURCES

As noted above, my primary sources for research include interviews with writers, producers, executives, and marketers who worked on American prime-time dramas that featured religious narratives. I draw on scholars like John Caldwell, Elana Levine, Vicki Mayer, Laura Grindstaff, David Hesmondhalgh, and Sarah Baker as models for this kind of production studies work.[81] I used snowball sampling to make contact with creatives, which yielded twenty-one interviews, most occurring over the phone, along with three interviews via email correspondence. I asked the same basic questions of the interview subjects. My focus was on the individuals' work and history within the television industry, not on personal subjects such as their religious backgrounds.[82] I took this approach for a few reasons: 1) it provided me with a more holistic view of their work within the television industry, allowing me to better understand how religion operated in the general production culture; 2) religion is a contentious personal subject, and I didn't want to create a sense of defensiveness on the part of the interviewees; 3) those who wanted to discuss their personal beliefs did so freely within the context of answering other questions; and 4) it eased the interviewee into a flow so that their answers to my questions about their work with religion might be more candid.

Each interview lasted between twenty minutes and an hour and a half, with most being an hour long. In addition to these personal interviews, I occasionally used publicly available interviews published in popular or trade press. These were especially useful for accessing perspectives from a few showrunners I did not manage to personally connect with but who have enough industry capital to speak openly about religion on their shows in publicly disclosed texts. All of these interviews provided a wealth of information beyond that available solely in

published materials. Very early on, I began recognizing patterns of containment that I found to reside at the heart of how religion operates within the Hollywood TV industry's production cultures. It is worth emphasizing that very few interviewees acknowledged their role in this act of containment, leaving it to me to identify this practice based on an analysis of their discourses along with the programs themselves.

Beyond interviews, I also analyzed marketing materials and articles in trade press (e.g., *Variety, Hollywood Reporter, Deadline*, etc.) and industry-focused popular press publications (e.g., *New York Times, Los Angeles Times*). These publicly disclosed and semi-embedded deep texts of the industry aided in my understanding of how the shows were positioned within the television industry and marketplace.[83] Particularly useful were marketing and promotional materials circulated through popular entertainment news websites that used religious iconography like *The Last Supper* to nod to the religious narratives of certain shows such as *Battlestar Galactica* (fig. 1) and *Lost* (fig. 2). These images only appeared in the marketing materials once the religious narratives were accepted by the upscale target audiences and could thus stretch the bounds of their containment.

Figure 1: *Battlestar Galactica* promotional photo for fourth season

Figure 2: *Lost* official season 6 cast photo

Finally but importantly, I perform textual analysis of the religious representations and narratives in each case study. I use ideological and genre analysis to gain a better understanding of how religion is represented and contained, as well as how it interacts with assumed audiences based on genre conventions.[84] In this project, both ideological and genre textual approaches are

consistently placed in conversation with an analysis of industry context and production discourses. The core of my study examines how the production practices of containment, abstraction, and disavowal shape representations of religion on prime-time television, with careful attention to the surprising contradictions between the representation and the discourse about it. I am looking at texts and how meaning is encoded within them; reception of religious representation and decoding are beyond the scope of this study. The religious representations articulated through the television programs are affected by the production practices of containment, but it is worth underscoring that the representations themselves are not explicitly—nor even predominantly—understood by viewers as contained. Religious viewers may see these representations as thorough, true, and fully religious cultural objects. Secular viewers may consider them mere fantasy. The polysemy of the religious representations I study does not impact my argument. I use the theoretical and cultural understanding of religion in post-Christianity to identify and analyze these religious representations *in order to* gain a greater understanding of how the production cultures' practices of containment affect their creative output and how the television industry perpetuates an ideology of religion as risky despite the greater creative freedoms that characterize the post-network era.

CHAPTER STRUCTURE

This introduction has outlined the argument, scope, theories, methods, and historical context for the six chapters of this study. With the exception of chapter one, each of the six chapters focus on a different group of prime-time American dramas originating in the boom period of 2003-2016, and, which, though not targeted to religious audiences, features at least one-season long Christian narrative. Chapter one establishes the baseline against which the

creatives working in the boom in religious representation have reacted. Chapters two through six study a variety of shows in this boom across distribution outlets, genres, and the 2003-2016 scope. The chapters also perform a loose chronological narrative of the progression of religious representation and how creatives discuss it, from the prehistory in chapter one through the course of majority of the boom in chapters two through four, and ending with the shifts occurring in the era of Peak TV in chapters five and six. Chapter two begins with *Battlestar Galactica's* 2003 miniseries, which aired at the early cusp of the post-network era, was developed soon after 9/11, and was the first major non-preachy drama centered on a religious narrative. The study ends with *Hand of God* (Amazon, 2014-) and *Preacher* (AMC, 2016-) representing a possible recent shift toward representing religion as "edgy" on certain channels and outlets and within particular contexts.

With each chapter focusing on a cluster of shows, the six chapters demonstrate how both the representation of and creatives' understanding of religion are affected by legacy ideologies and practices. The legacy ideologies and practices, as well as genre expectations and assumptions by creatives about target audiences, shape how religion and its representations are positioned within prime-time television's production discourses. Cumulatively, these discourses show that religion, even as an abstraction, was anomalous to the representational and production practices within the contemporary television industry, which otherwise seems to be characterized by greater openness and textual possibilities in the first dozen years of the post-network era. In the 2015-2016 season, the confluence of both industrial and cultural changes over the course of the dozen-year boom led to a shift closer to the positioning of other contemporary post-network era subjects such as sex, violence, and explicit content.

Chapter one focuses on two 1990s shows, *Touched by an Angel* (CBS, 1994-2003) and *7th Heaven* (WB, 1996-2007). This chapter demonstrates how, during the neo-network era, Hollywood TV's creatives and executives linked religion to preachiness, that is to say, sermon-like moralizing. The naturalized ideology equating religious and preachy underlies the habitual practice of later creatives who avoided having their shows labeled "religious" or even discussing religion-qua-religion. *Touched by an Angel* featured moralistic episodic adventures of guardian angels helping those in need. Its star (Roma Downey) and executive producer (Martha Williamson) were both evangelical Christians, further strengthening the equation of religious representation with Christian preachiness. Industrially, during its initial run, *Touched by an Angel*'s positioning by CBS marketers and in syndication on "God-flavored" PAX-TV reinforced its Christianity in both representation and audience targeting.[85] *7th Heaven*, meanwhile, was a family drama that centered on the reverend of a suburban town, his wife, and their five children. Each moral lesson learned by the Camden family was framed by Reverend Camden's vocation, and many episodes featured his Sunday-morning homilies. *7th Heaven* was not positioned to be as overtly religious as *Touched by an Angel,* but both shows treated religion as inoffensively as possible. This is because both represented a moment in the history of American prime time in which a mass-like audience was still sought. As a result, both shows' religious representations were bland and deliberately uncontroversial so as not to alienate the assumed-religious middlebrow audience that still dominated industrial thinking about viewers in the 1990s. By analyzing these shows, their industrial positioning, and the discourses creatives perpetuated about them, chapter one demonstrates how these preachy shows shaped later creative understandings of mainstream religious television series. These shows did not disappear in the post-network era either; rather, they either moved to religious-oriented outlets such as GMC/UP

and the Hallmark Channel or, more conspicuously, their approach reappeared on mainstream television in the form of highly promoted Biblical adaptations. The 1990s preachy shows and their post-network descendants in the form of Biblical adaptations solidified the assumption that religious programs attracted a middlebrow audience that alienated upscale viewers. The persistence of this ideology shaped the production cultures that required religion to be both abstracted conceptually and contained by a variety of distancing or displacement strategies.

The next two chapters, chapters two and three, examine how notions of quality in production cultures corresponded to the displacement of religion through two different genre categories: realist and fantastic genres. These two genre groupings create two different strategies of religious representation: displacing religion onto the American South and displacing religion onto unreal fantastic worlds. Chapter two focuses on two realist television dramas from the post-network era boom which attempt to cultivate quality claims and audiences: *Friday Night Lights* (NBC, 2006-2011) and *Rectify* (SundanceTV, 2013-). These two shows represent religion, that is to say Christianity, realistically and specifically. But more importantly, each show represents religion as both the dominant faith of their characters and as a characteristic part of Southern culture. The quality claims sought were incompatible with religion-represented-as-religion given the fear of middlebrow associations within the culture of Hollywood production. Realist genre religion, therefore, required some distancing strategy, and in the examples of chapter two, that was the displacement of religion into an othered culture. Situated as a part of Southern culture, religion is safely incorporated into regional representation. Creatives used the milieu of the American South to shift religion away from themselves and their quality audience expectations, maintaining their acceptability within the dominant non-Christian culture of television production. Creatives othered American Southern culture in order to explore the religious other

of Christianity within it. This displacement safely contained religion within the creatives' production culture, allowing them to acknowledge religious content.

Chapter three explores how quality positioning affects the representation of religion within fantastic genres of fantasy, science fiction, and horror. This chapter focuses on three shows from the boom in religious content: *Battlestar Galactica* (Sci Fi, 2003-2009), *Lost* (ABC, 2004-2011), and *The Leftovers* (HBO 2014-). Unlike realist dramas, fantastic genre shows could displace religion through their generic unreality. These dramas do not represent religion as traditional religion within our familiar culture, but rather they present recognizably religious elements in the functioning of belief systems with deep meaning for characters. Like the realist dramas, each of these three series was positioned and categorized as a quality drama, and so religious elements required containment. Within the production culture for fantastic series, religion is acknowledged but contained. The fantastic genre context allows for distancing content from traditional religious narratives and distances characters' beliefs from specific religious creed, labeling religion as spirituality. Religious content in these fantastic series—albeit as abstracted spirituality—is acknowledged in their production cultures. This acknowledgement distinguishes these programs from the other fantastic dramas that follow in this study. Creatives working on these three fantastic genre quality shows were relatively free in their discussion of religious representation largely because of the generic distancing from traditional religions. On the spectrum of religious representational containment strategies and how creatives discuss religion, religion-as-spirituality in quality fantastic dramas occupies the midpoint between religion-as-religion and religion-as-mythology.

Chapters four and five turn to fantastic genre programs that abstract religion to the point of mythology, that is, religious pastiche. Differing from the fantastic quality series, the fantastic

dramas of chapters four and five primarily target a different upscale niche audience: the commodified fan audience associated with the fantastic genres. Chapter four investigates eschatological dramas in three programs that use the Biblical Book of Revelation as their premise *Supernatural* (WB/CW, 2005-), *Dominion* (Syfy, 2014-2015), and *Sleepy Hollow* (Fox, 2013-). Despite the direct connection with the New Testament, the shows' creatives disavow the religious nature of their narratives. Each use the Bible as the basis for what they assert is supernatural mythology. Instead of spirituality, which maintains some sense of religious functioning, mythology is used by creatives as a specifically non-religious term. Such a strong disavowal of religion is especially necessary for creatives working on these three shows: they had a particularly strong fear of being associated with religious culture and audiences because their narratives are so closely tied to the Bible. When dramas hew as close to Biblical literalism as these three shows do, the distancing from religion requires an equally extreme but opposite reaction: constructing their work in religion as wholly areligious or even anti-religious. The pushback against religion aligns with the assumption that the upscale fan audience these shows target is non-religious.

Chapter five analyzes the fantastic comic book adaptations of *Constantine* (NBC, 2014-2015)*, Lucifer* (Fox, 2016-)*,* and *Preacher (*AMC, 2016-). *Constantine*, aligns closely with the practices of creatives working on the fantastic eschatological dramas of chapter four as it aired concurrently with them. *Constantine*'s failure was attributed to the rejection of qualities of its comic book source text—edgy, serial, and with upscale fan audience appeal—and the network decision to adapt it as a procedural and with broad, multi-quadrant audience appeal and non-religious positioning. Notably, the religious elements were not among the aspects rejected or downplayed from comic book to television series. This disconnect between what comic readers

liked and what the show presented as well as the non-religious positioning of *Constantine* were not repeated with *Lucifer* and *Preacher.* Both of those comic book adaptations maintain edginess and the overt religious representation of the sources. As such, they illustrate the shift occurring in 2015 and 2016 because they—in representation and creative discourse—overtly acknowledge the religious histories and meanings of their religious characters and storylines. The acknowledgement remains somewhat contained by both fantastic generic means and the distancing afforded in adapting comic book sources, which are ready-made and established with regard to their religious stories. Nonetheless, with these shows is evidence of the shift in how religion is acknowledged in creatives' discourse about their work, if at all. The processes and negotiations shaping how religion appears on television and how creatives discuss religious representation resulted in an array of practices for safely containing religion within boom era conditions antithetical to religious content. In that process, religious content on television was able to expand, and further facilitated by industrial conditions, a turning point seems to have occurred by 2015, whereby more creatives could push past the hesitation they previously had expressed in public discourse and textual practice.

The final chapter, six, examines religious representation and creatives' understanding of it within the new realm of original programming on streaming television. This chapter's case studies of Netflix's *Daredevil* (2015-) and Amazon's *Hand of God* (which aired its pilot in 2014 and began its series run in 2015) point us to the most notable shifts thus far in the discourse and depiction of religion on mainstream television. Here we can see clear evidence of how changing industry context, cultural conditions, audience engagement and continued fragmenting into niche taste cultures coalesce to lead to greater diversity and increasing—if slowly—acknowledgment of religion's use in prime-time dramas. These most recent case studies illustrate how

combinations of containment strategies and claims of abstraction analyzed in the earlier chapters create production environments in which religion is still risky but that risk is far less rigid than it has been throughout most of the post-network era. Along with AMC's *Preacher*, these two streaming dramas represent religion-as-religion within industrial practices that position even traditional religion as part of their edgy and quality claims. The assumed audience for these shows is still perceived as non-religious, but after a dozen years of the boom, they are no longer imagined as wholly oppositional to religious representation. All that matters is that they steer clear of preachiness, the middlebrow, direct-but-bland approach to religion.

In the conclusion to the dissertation, I discuss how this project's focus on 2003 to 2016 represents a particular historical moment for the TV industry and its production practices, and then speculate on the future possibilities for religious representation as industrial transformations continue. I consider the shows airing at the end of the boom and speculate on the possibility of shifts within practices of the television industry cultures producing these newer shows. My research addresses how and why, sometime soon, religion in the Hollywood television industry will no longer be perceived as inherently risky. The conclusion also identifies a number of potential areas of further research and addresses the larger stakes of this project.

---

[1] Peter Sciretta, "HBO Kills Preacher Television Series - /Film," *Slashfilm*, August 26, 2008, http://www.slashfilm.com/hbo-kills-preacher-television-series/; Rob Allstetter, "Mark Steven Johnson: No Preacher on HBO," *Comics Continuum*, August 25, 2008, http://www.comicscontinuum.com/stories/0808/25/index.htm?loc=interstitialskip.
[2] Josef Adalian, "There Were Over 400 Scripted TV Shows on the Air in 2015," *Vulture*, December 16, 2015, http://www.vulture.com/2015/12/scripted-tv-shows-2015.html
[3] Clark Collis, "Why the 'Preacher' Producers Trashed Their Original Plans for the Show," *Entertainment Weekly's EW.com*, May 13, 2016, http://www.ew.com/article/2016/05/13/preacher-seth-rogen-trashed-plans.
[4] Anonymous A, telephone interview, January 18, 2015.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Amanda D. Lotz, *The Television Will Be Revolutionized* (NYU Press, 2007), 216.

[8] Michele Hilmes, *Only Connect: A Cultural History of Broadcasting in the United States*. 3rd Ed.(Boston, MA: Cengage, 2010), 218.
[9] Amanda D. Lotz, *The Television Will Be Revolutionized* (NYU Press, 2007).
[10] Jennifer Holt, *Empires of Entertainment: Media Industries and the Politics of Deregulation, 1980-1996* (Rutgers University Press, 2011).
[11] Curtin, "On Edge," 280.
[12] Ibid., 284.
[13] Ibid., 279.
[14] Ien Ang, *Desperately Seeking the Audience* (London: Routledge, 1991), 88.
[15] Joseph Turow, *Breaking up America: Advertisers and the New Media World* (Chicago, Ill: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 59.
[16] Heather Hendershot, *Shaking the World for Jesus: Media and Conservative Evangelical Culture* (University of Chicago Press, 2010), 7.
[17] Ibid., 61.
[18] Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950s*, eBook (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), accessed March 3, 2014, 107.
[19] Stewart M. Hoover, "Visual Religion in Media Culture," in *The Visual Culture of American Religions*, ed. David Morgan and Sally M. Promey (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 156.
[20] Horace Newcomb, "Religion on Television," in *Channels of Belief: Religion and American Commercial Television*, ed. John P. Ferre (Ames, IA: University of Iowa Press, 1990), 41
[21] Jennifer Fuller, "Branding Blackness on US Cable Television," *Media, Culture & Society* 32, no. 2 (March 1, 2010): 285–305.
[22] Turow, *Breaking up America,* 56.
[23] Hendershot, 11.
[24] Newcomb, "Religion on Television," 41.
[25] "*Battlestar Galactica*," *Peabody Awards*, accessed April 11, 2016, http://www.peabodyawards.com/award-profile/battlestar-galactica; James Hibberd, "Syfy Plans to Lure You Back with These 5 Shows," *Entertainment Weekly's EW.com*, October 28, 2014, http://www.ew.com/article/2014/10/28/syfy; Richard Vine, "Better than The Wire?," *The Guardian*, March 18, 2009, sec. Television & radio, http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2009/mar/19/battlestar-galactica-review.
[26] James Fallows, "Bush's Lost Year," *The Atlantic*, October 2004, http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2004/10/bushs-lost-year/303507/.
[27] Ronald D. Moore, telephone interview, March 6, 2015.
[28] Tiffany Vogt, "TV Watchtower: Is Religion Killing Good Sci-Fi Shows? | Airlock Alpha," October 19, 2010, http://airlockalpha.com/node/7945/tv-watchtower-is-religion-killing-good-sci-fi-shows.html.
[29] Kevin Arceneaux and Stephen P. Nicholson, "Who Wants to Have a Tea Party? The Who, What, and Why of the Tea Party Movement," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 45, no. 4 (2012): 700–710.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Ross Douthat, "The Changing Culture War," *The New York Times*, December 6, 2010, http://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/06/opinion/06douthat.html.

[32] Horace Newcomb, "'This Is Not Al Dente': The Sopranos and the New Meaning of 'Television,'" in *Television: The Critical View*, ed. Horace Newcomb, 7th Ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 575.
[33] Lotz, *The Television Will Be Revolutionized*, 3.
[34] Lotz, *The Television Will Be Revolutionized*, 5.
[35] Napoli, 156-7.
[36] Newcomb, "You Call this Al Dente?," 575.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Josef Adalian, "There Were Over 400 Scripted TV Shows on the Air in 2015," *Vulture*, December 16, 2015, http://www.vulture.com/2015/12/scripted-tv-shows-2015.html.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Josef Adalian and Maria Elena Fernandez, "The Business of Too Much TV," *Vulture*, May 18, 2016, http://www.vulture.com/2016/05/peak-tv-business-c-v-r.html.
[41] Denise Mann, "It's Not TV, It's Brand Management," in *Production Studies: Cultural Studies of Media Industries*, ed. Vicki Mayer, Miranda J. Banks, and John T. Caldwell (Routledge, 2009); Derek Kompare, "'More 'moments of Television": Online Cult Television Authorship," in *Flow TV: Television in the Age of Media Convergence*, ed. Michael Kackman et al. (Routledge, 2010); Jason Mittell, "Authorship," *Complex TV*, accessed July 16, 2013, http://mediacommons.futureofthebook.org/mcpress/complextelevision/authorship/.
[42] Newman and Levine, 20.
[43] Jaramillo, "The Family Racket," 62; Deborah L. Jaramillo, "AMC Stumbling toward a New Television Canon," *Television & New Media* 14, no. 2 (March 1, 2013): 167–83.
[44] Thomas Mallon and Pankaj Mishra, "Highbrow, Lowbrow, Middlebrow — Do These Kinds of Cultural Categories Mean Anything Anymore?," *The New York Times*, July 29, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/03/books/review/highbrow-lowbrow-middlebrow-do-these-kinds-of-cultural-categories-mean-anything-anymore.html; Newman and Levine; Victoria E. Johnson, *Heartland TV: Prime Time Television and the Struggle for U.S. Identity* (NYU Press, 2008).
[45] Heather Hendershot, *Shaking the World for Jesus: Media and Conservative Evangelical Culture* (University of Chicago Press, 2010), 13.
[46] David Weddle, telephone interview, January 26, 2015; Brusta Brown and J.M. Todd, telephone interview, April 23, 2015.
[47] John T. Caldwell, "Cultures of Production; Studying Industry's Deep Texts, Reflexive Rituals, and Managed Self-Disclosures," in *Media Industries: History, Theory, and Method*, ed. Jennifer Holt and Alisa Perren, 1st ed. (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 199–212.
[48] Jonathan Gray and Amanda D. Lotz, *Television Studies* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2012), 141.
[49] Jorie Lagerwey, "Are You There, God? It's Me, TV: Religion in American TV Drama, 2000-2009" (Dissertation, University of Southern California, 2009), http://digitallibrary.usc.edu/cdm/ref/collection/p15799coll3/id/227570, 192.
[50] John Fiske, *Television Culture*, (New York: Routledge, 2001), 109.
[51] Jason Mittell, "A Cultural Approach to Television Genre Theory," *Cinema Journal*, 40:3 (Spring 2001), 8.
[52] Steve Neale, *Genre and Hollywood*, (New York: Routledge, 2000), 35.
[53] Newman and Levine, *Legitimating Television*, 99.

[54] Catherine Johnson, *Telefantasy* (British Film Institute, 2005), 7.
[55] Andrew J. Bottomley, "Quality TV and the Branding of U.S. Network Television: Marketing and Promoting *Friday Night Lights*," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 32, no. 5 (July 4, 2015): 482–97; Matthew Zoller Seitz, "Sundance's Rectify, Perhaps the Most Quiet Drama on TV, Is Truly Christian Art," *Vulture*, June 19, 2014, http://www.vulture.com/2014/06/tv-review-rectify-season-2.html?mid=facebook_vulture; Mary McNamara, "Review: 'Rectify' Is a Revelation That Sets a New Standard," *Los Angeles Times*, April 22, 2013, http://articles.latimes.com/2013/apr/22/entertainment/la-et-st-rectify-20130422; Mike Hale, "'Rectify' on the Sundance Channel," *The New York Times*, April 21, 2013, sec. Arts / Television, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/22/arts/television/rectify-on-the-sundance-channel.html.
[56] Matt Fowler, "Syfy Looking to Get Back to Battlestar Galactica-Quality Sci-Fi," *IGN*, October 30, 2014, http://www.ign.com/articles/2014/10/30/syfy-looking-to-get-back-to-battlestar-galactica-quality-sci-fi; Michael Kackman, "Flow Favorites: Quality Television, Melodrama, and Cultural Complexity Michael Kackman / University of Texas – Austin – Flow," accessed April 5, 2016, http://www.flowjournal.org/2010/03/flow-favorites-quality-television-melodrama-and-cultural-complexity-michael-kackman-university-of-texas-austin/; "Networking Families: Battlestar Galactica and the Values of Quality Jordan Lavender-Smith / City University of New York – Flow," accessed April 5, 2016, http://www.flowjournal.org/2009/12/networking-families-battlestar-galactica-and-the-values-of-quality-jordan-lavender-smith-city-university-of-new-york/; Cory Barker, "Sophomore Jump: How The Leftovers Became the Best Show on TV," *TV.com*, December 3, 2015, http://www.tv.com/shows/the-leftovers/community/post/the-leftovers-season-2-improvement-144907112784/.
[57] Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures*, (New York: Routledge, 2002), 43.
[58] Ibid, 27; Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 12.
[59] John Thornton Caldwell, *Televisuality: Style, Crisis, and Authority in American Television* (Rutgers University Press, 1995).
[60] Jason Mittell, *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling*, pre-publication edition (MediaCommons Press, 2012-13), http://mcpress.media-commons.org/complextelevision/
[61] Caldwell, *Televisuality*; Mittell, *Complex TV*; Neale, *Genre and Hollywood*.
[62] I will address prior phases of quality television below in the history section.
[63] Deborah L. Jaramillo, "The Family Racket: AOL Time Warner, HBO, *The Sopranos*, and the Construction of a Quality Brand," *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 26:1 (January 2002), 66.
[64] Michael Z. Newman and Elana Levine, *Legitimating Television* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 13.
[65] Michael Curtin, "On Edge;" Ron Becker, "Prime-Time Television in the Gay Nineties," in *The Television Studies Reader*, ed. Annette Hill and Allen, Robert C. (Psychology Press, 2004).
[66] See: Kristal Brent Zook, *Color By Fox*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).
[67] Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature,* trans. Randal Johnson, (Columbia University Press, 1993), 44.
[68] Caldwell, *Production Culture,* 34.

[69] For more on religion as a fourth category of identity politics, see: Stanley Fish, "One University Under God?," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 7, 2005, https://chronicle.com/article/One-University-Under-God-/45077/.
[70] Amanda D. Lotz, "Industry-Level Studies and the Contributions of Gitlin's *Inside Prime Time*," in *Production Studies: Cultural Studies of Media Industries*, ed. Vicki Mayer, Miranda J. Banks, and John T. Caldwell (Routledge, 2009), 28.
[71] Ibid., 35.
[72] Amanda D. Lotz, *The Television Will Be Revolutionized* (NYU Press, 2007).
[73] "'No Religion' on the Rise: 19.6% Have No Religious Affiliation - Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life," October 9, 2012, http://www.pewforum.org/Unaffiliated/nones-on-the-rise.aspx.
[74] Ibid.
[75] Ibid.
[76] Jean-Luc Nancy, "The Deconstruction of Christianity," in *Religion and Media*, ed. Hent de Vries and Samuel Weber, trans. Simon Sparks, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), 116-17.
[77] Rudolph Binion, *After Christianity: Christian Survivals in Post-Christian Culture*, (Durango, CO: Logbridge-Rhodes, Inc., 1986), 121.
[78] Emile Durkheim, "The Social as Sacred," in *Introducing Religion: Readings from the Classic Theorists*, ed. Daniel L. Pals (Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2009).
[79] Mircea Eliade, "Religion as Response to the Sacred," in *Introducing Religion: Readings from the Classic Theorists*, ed. Daniel L. Pals (Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2009).
[80] See: Heather Hendershot, *Shaking the World for Jesus*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004),
[81] John Thornton Caldwell, *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television* (Duke University Press, 2008); Elana Levine, "Toward a Paradigm for Media Production Research: Behind the Scenes at General Hospital," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 18, no. 1 (2001): 66–82; Vicki Mayer, "Studying Up and F**cking Up: Ethnographic Interviewing in Production Studies," *Cinema Journal* 47, no. 2 (2007): 141–48; Laura Grindstaff, *The Money Shot: Trash, Class, and the Making of TV Talk Shows*, 1st ed. (University Of Chicago Press, 2002); David Hesmondhalgh and Sarah Baker, *Creative Labour: Media Work in Three Cultural Industries*, 1st ed. (Routledge, 2011).
[82] See Appendix C for generalized version of questions.
[83] Caldwell, "Cultures of Production."
[84] For genre and ideological analysis, I draw on Mittell, "A Cultural Approach;" Fiske, *Television Culture*; and C. Johnson, *Telefantasy*.
[85] Victoria E. Johnson, "Welcome Home?: CBS, PAX-TV, and 'Heartland' Values in a Neo-Network Era," *Velvet Light Trap: A Critical Journal Of Film & Television*, no. 46 (Fall 2000), 40.

Chapter One Neo-Network Prehistory and "Preachy" Programs

THE NEO-NETWORK EFFECT ON POST-NETWORK PRODUCTIONS: AGAINST "PREACHY"

While researching television industry production cultures for this study, a surprising pattern emerged: among shows with obviously religious narratives, the writers, producers, and executives working on them regularly labeled them as "not religious." This pattern led me to wonder what "religious" means to key creative figures within the contemporary Hollywood television industry. While that question informs the entire study, the purpose of this chapter is to provide an appropriate historical context through an investigation of dramas from the 1990s whose content was overtly religious (and Christian), but which were imagined and targeted to mainstream broadcast audiences, rather than religious audiences.

In the post-network television environment, and especially among writers, the word "religious" was and continues to be avoided for the most part. When it was used by the creatives I interviewed, it implied that religious meant "preachy," a term used by WB executive, Jordan Levin as something to be avoided. The writers I spoke to did not want their work associated with preachy dramas. For them even the word religious carried connotations of preachiness, and preachiness, in terms of audience assumptions, was middlebrow. Preachiness indicated overt moralizing, a religiously-slanted lesson learned by both characters and viewers at the end of an episode, which in turn would hamper any sense of ongoing conflict or dramatic tension. The concept of middlebrow tastes indicates blandly inoffensive creative productions associated with mass appeal.[1] For the writers I spoke to, their shows weren't religious because they weren't preachy, and therefore their shows could target quality audiences rather than middlebrow

viewers. Quality audiences, as indicated in the introduction, refer to the industry imaginary of upscale, affluent, liberal audiences and their attendant taste culture that has been constructed in opposition to regular (middlebrow) television. The creatives I spoke to very rarely mentioned any shows that they considered preachy, nor did they acknowledge any connection with them, historical or otherwise. Instead, they maintained the term religious did not fit their shows.

Their unwillingness to call their shows religious or to view them as part of a history of religious television is directly related to a set of assumptions about religious representation on television, and associated assumptions about audience, genre, and production. The formation of these assumptions is rooted in attitudes about 1990s shows that were religiously didactic, or preachy: evangelical Christian religious messages motivated the show's creation (e.g., *Touched by an Angel*) or became associated with the show (e.g., *7th Heaven*). The audience targeted by these preachy shows was subsequently constructed as middlebrow. Such shows are incompatible with quality television from the perspective of key creative and executive figures in the 1990s and beyond. The belief in this incompatibility was shaped by both the association of religion with middlebrow tastes and notions of quality television as it was evolving in the 1990s to incorporate distinctive style and content for upscale audiences.

Historically, the shows that I argue epitomize the undesirable preachy discourse appeared in two phases. The first phase consisted of two key shows, *7th Heaven* (WB, 1996-2007) and *Touched by an Angel* (CBS, 1994-2003). Both had a significant impact in the industry as examples of mass-audience-oriented successes on broadcast outlets.[2] Both shows helped fledgling networks establish their brand and build their audience, WB network and PAX-TV (the small network anchored by *Touched by an Angel* reruns), respectively. Later, in the early 2010s, the second phase occurred in an effort to reassert the commercial and cultural viability of

religious broadcast success into the mainstream. As part of this phase, Roma Downey, her husband Mark Burnett, and their production companies created a grouping of Bible adaptation dramas including *The Bible* (History, 2013*), A.D.: The Bible Continues* (NBC, 2015), and *The Dovekeepers* (CBS, 2015) for cable and broadcast outlets. This second round of preachy dramas enabled a discursive linkage between religious motives and preachy representation beyond the 1990s.

Significantly, *7th Heaven* and *Touched by an Angel* were the longest-running and most commercially successful religious dramas in the neo-network era. These family-friendly moralizing dramas were highly successful, and moreover, served as key points against which later shows and creatives reacted in the 2003-2016 post-network era boom in religious programming. Within the television industry, however, their moment of peak popularity and commercial success is also the moment when Hollywood creatives turned away from embracing the notion, if not the reality, of representing religion on television. That is, "religious" became associated with "preachy" and thus became creatively undesirable. Following that association, creatives and executives avoided acknowledging religion within their work on dramatic shows. This was the case even as representations of religion began appearing more frequently on prime-time dramatic television starting in 2003.

This chapter investigates these preachy television shows of the 1990s (and their industrial descendants, the Biblical adaptations of the 2010s) and situates them in their historical, industrial, and discursive context. In so doing, I can establish key reference points for later attitudes of creatives regarding the presentation – or avoidance – of religion on scripted television. A certain set of assumptions among creatives about religious representation in prime-time American dramas has developed in the twenty-first century, and many of these assumptions

are in response to the terms set by the two shows that are the focal point of this chapter: *Touched by an Angel* and *7th Heaven*.

OLD NETWORKS AND NEW NETLETS: BROADCAST IN THE NEO-NETWORK ERA

The 1990s stand out in television history as a time during which broadcasting dramatically transformed. A range of new cable channels and systems launched and expanded, and two new major broadcast channels (the WB and UPN) were launched during this time as well. A few years earlier, Fox was the first new "fourth" broadcast channel to appear in almost fifty years, challenging the monopoly held by the three major networks. In general, the desirable audience for the "Big Three" of CBS, ABC, and NBC was the mass audience.[3] These conditions shaped the broadcast networks' programming strategies in the 1990s. For the most part, CBS continued with the least objectionable programming strategy of mass appeal that had driven much of its classic network era programming. Although CBS turned to quality sitcoms in the 1970s and continued to produce the occasional quality drama like *Northern Exposure* (1990-1995), *Touched by an Angel* represented CBS at its most mass philosophy. CBS in the 1990s generally courted the heartland audience.[4] Some of their programs, including *Touched by an Angel*, represented the height of middlebrow blandness, which I see in terms of style, genre, narrative, and character.

ABC, meanwhile, succeeded with the popular TGIF family comedy block (e.g. *Step By Step* [1991-1998]*, Family* Matters [1989-1998]*, Full House* [1987-1995]), as well as its newly formed industrial ties to Disney, which purchased ABC in 1995. ABC positioned itself as a "family-friendly" network, a designation that remained even after they canceled their TGIF block in the mid-1990s, around the time of the WB's launch. NBC, in contrast, gained prominence in the 1990s for its quality "Must-See TV" block of upscale Thursday night

comedies, which included the sitcom *Seinfeld* (1989-1998) as well as its tentpole medical drama, *ER* (1994-2009). Fox's youth—both in terms of the age of the network and its primary target audience demographics (both younger and more diverse than the "Big Three")—led it to pursue narrower strategies of audience targeting and exhibit a greater reliance on "edge" to set their programs apart from the other broadcast networks. Into this landscape, in 1995, two new networks sought to find their place as "netlets" that bridged broad- and narrowcasting strategies. These netlets were the WB and UPN.

The WB and UPN both emerged in January of 1995 and, from their inception, shared a number of characteristics: both used Fox's early years and programming strategies as a model; both were distribution arms of television production studios Warner Bros and Paramount, respectively; both vied for the same local affiliates to carry their new networks so that they could reach a level of market "clearance;" and both narrowed the broadcast idea of "mass" audience to a more youth-oriented but still broader-than-niche-cable appeal while trying to figure out how they could fill key programming gaps left by the major networks.[5] At the WB's first presentation at the "upfronts," WB executives told the room of advertisers present that "they were taking 'dead aim' at the kids, teens, and young adults ABC had left behind with the dismantling of its 'TGIF' Friday comedy lineup."[6] The WB launched with original comedy programming (such as *Unhappily Ever After* [1995-1999], a *Married…With Children* [Fox, 1987-1997] clone) and the rejected-at-NBC *The Wayans Bros.* (1995-1999). During their second year, they turned to legendary producer Aaron Spelling (*Charlie's Angels* [ABC, 1976-1981], *Dynasty* [ABC, 1981-1989], *Beverly Hills 90210* [Fox, 1990-2000]) to help them create a "light family drama" that executives believed "was not like anything else on the air."[7] This became the WB's most successful drama in the life of the netlet: *7th Heaven*. This hour-long series targeted certain

segments of the mass audience that were perceived to be largely abandoned as a result of the shifts at the broadcast networks taking root in the 1990s. As the netlets further developed their programming, they would continue to narrow both their genre offerings and their target audiences, meaning that the narrative and stylistic features of middlebrow fare like *7th Heaven* became outliers to their brand identities.

A few years after the launch of The WB and UPN, PAX-TV came on the scene as a much smaller over-the-air network. Pax was launched in 1998 by the "media magnate and professed born-again Christian Lowell White 'Bud' Paxson" to appeal to those for whom God was part of their everyday lives.[8] The netlet favored carefully curated second-run syndication deals that fit their brand, rather than opting for original scripted fare. PAX-TV had far fewer affiliates than any of the major networks and netlets, and a much smaller audience than even the WB or UPN. PAX-TV created a brand focused on appealing to the middlebrow audience and its attendant "God-flavor."[9] When it launched in 1998, PAX-TV used reruns of *Touched by an Angel* as both a programming anchor and indicator of brand identity through its appeal to middlebrow, religious audiences. In addition to *Touched By an Angel*, which was already a big hit on CBS, PAX-TV's stable of reruns relied on other CBS productions such as *Diagnosis Murder* (1993-2002) and *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman* (1993-1998).[10] PAX-TV's programming aligned with the output of CBS's in-house production studio at the time, since both CBS and PAX-TV were marketing themselves as "explicitly *broad*casters catering to a multigenerational family audience that is, in their vision, ideally middle American," which includes Christian morals and middlebrow tastes.[11]

One thing that these new networks of the 1990s shared was a heavy reliance on favorable affiliate relations. ABC, NBC, CBS, and to a far lesser degree, Fox, all had established affiliates

in place by the mid-1990s. In the preceding decades, a system had emerged in which affiliate separation from the parent network was largely not done. However, with the advent of new networks, the threat of losing affiliate stations loomed. The newly launched netlets of The WB and UPN were both scrambling for the same one or two independent affiliates within a television market or, in the case of PAX, relegated to lower quality UHF frequencies. Within this context of competition, offending even one affiliate by airing controversial or edgy fare could be disastrous. Thus, strategies of containment for potentially controversial fare was a market imperative.

PREACHY RELIGIOUS MESSAGES AND THE MIDDLEBROW AUDIENCE: *TOUCHED BY AN ANGEL*

In the mid-to-late-1990s, *Touched by an Angel* presented a mode of storytelling that was unusual for network broadcast television: a drama with a religious agenda. The show's executive producer, Martha Williamson, and star, Roma Downey, are both Christian and were open with the press from the time of the show's inception about how their religion shaped the content. As Victoria Johnson notes in her study of CBS, PAX, and *Touched by an Angel*, the show was key to CBS's 1996 "Welcome Home!" marketing campaign and programming strategy. *Touched by an Angel*'s significance within the spectrum of neo-network broadcasting was underlined when its reruns were used to anchor the heartland-oriented upstart broadcast network PAX-TV in the late 1990s.[12] Johnson argues that PAX-TV made explicit the connections between heartland audiences and religious belief, writing, "CBS's and PAX's institutional identities are premised on the profitability of three concepts . . . home, the nuclear family, and belief in God."[13] This belief in God is contextualized within American Christian norms assumed about the mass audience that enjoyed *Touched by an Angel*. The show featured a trio of helpful angels, moving through

American society, and helping those that need it. They are benign and largely unencumbered by obvious evangelism, but they are still angels and situated within a Christian context.

From the first episode of the series, "The Southbound Bus," the Christian angelic frame is strongly hinted at even before the first words of dialogue are spoken. The camera pans across a desert setting through which Monica (Roma Downey) walks barefoot, untroubled by the rattlesnake nearby. She takes off her white scarf and lets it fly in the wind, where it transforms into a white dove, a symbol of the Holy Ghost within the Christian Holy Trinity. She walks up to Tess (Della Reese), who is singing "I am thankful for this beautiful day," with a cadence that echoes Southern church songs. Monica and Tess are presented as otherworldly, cuing the audience that these are the titular angels of the show. The series' general plotline then launches as Tess tells Monica that she has been moved from Search and Rescue to Case Work. These characters are angels, serving God, working to help humans through their case work. Tess says, "Somebody—and I do mean Somebody—has decided to give you a promotion." To which Monica responds, "Hallelujah, I'm a case worker!" With the emphatic second use of "Somebody," Tess points up at the sky, indicating that individual is God, or at least a member of the Heavenly Host. The two angels discuss the bravery it takes to be human; "And they don't even know what we know," Monica says. "God help them," Tess responds before giving Monica advice about taking on a human form long-term. These exchanges, particularly the last—and final, most overt—invocation of God are expressed with sincerity. There is no winking or tongue-in-cheek distancing. This opening scene sets the dominant tone for the series: joyful, grateful, optimistic, Christian.

Such is the attitude of the angels that are the central characters of the series, but throughout the series, they must deal with the modern doubters as well. They show's episodic

narrative structure allows for the angels to time and again bring doubters into the fold, to reveal to them God's love. Later in the first episode, for example, Monica reveals herself to be an angel to Christine, a woman who left her family after her youngest child died in her crib. She tearfully and angrily asks Monica, "You're an angel? So what? What are you doing here now? Where the hell were you a year ago? Where was the angel when my baby died alone in her crib?" As Christine breaks down sobbing, the light around Monica brightens to the point of saturation as the high notes on a harp are strung. Monica tells her there was an angel with her baby that night and that angel remains with her child in heaven. Christine looks into Monica's face, and an image and sound of a laughing baby is superimposed as Monica says, "God loves you, Christine, so much you can't even imagine. And so do I." After Christine leaves, overwhelmed, Monica gets down on her knees and prays to God for help. Faith, particularly that of traditional Christianity, is the moral, narrative, and emotional guiding force for the series, made evident and overt in its first episode. The sincere, unambiguous, central appeals to God and God's work through the angels doesn't shy away from—and in fact embraces—Christian moral lessons such as forgiveness, love, repentance, and often the ideal of a unified nuclear family. It is not that these lessons are necessarily Christian, but in the context of *Touched by an Angel* (and also *7th Heaven*) they are framed in terms of Christian teachings and culture.

Although *Touched by an Angel* appealed to religious audiences, it was not explicitly targeted toward them. The religious appeal was largely a byproduct of the show's middlebrow moralizing within a slightly abstracted Christian imaginary of the mass American audience. That is, there was nothing potentially alienating or challenging about the show's representation of religion, its storytelling, or its style. It was a mainstream episodic drama with an uplifting message at the end of each episode. Moreover, in the summer of 1996, when *Touched by an*

Angel was positioned at the core of CBS's "Welcome Home!" programming slate, it aired on Sunday nights preceding family films like *Tuesdays With Morrie* on "America's Night at the Movies."[14] This programming decision by CBS anchored *Touched by an Angel* on the family night, Sunday, and aligned it with similar moralizing telefilms with their own bit of "God-flavor." Its generally unremarkable style and storytelling are key to *Touched by an Angel*'s middlebrow associations.

Middlebrow is primarily a designation of audience, but like quality, that audience taste culture is an imaginary created by content producers and the various television industry intermediaries that influence the system of audience targeting. *Touched by an Angel*'s normal genre, style, marketing, storytelling, and audience exemplify the multivalent connotations of middlebrow that are attached to it. Middlebrow is one way of talking about taste, somewhere between elite and low taste cultures; it occurs only in relation to highbrow and lowbrow designations and is defined mainly by defying classification as either. As Pierre Bourdieu argued, "Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier. Social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make, between the beautiful and the ugly."[15] That is, middlebrow is a taste culture defined by that which it is not: highbrow (in television, elite and its subdivision quality) or lowbrow (trash television), neither beautiful nor ugly, merely inoffensive. In a neo-network era during which broadcasters were starting to shift away from the idea of a mass audience, and particularly rejecting the tastes associated with mass appeal attained through middlebrow programming, the seeds of post-network era avoidance of such middlebrow appeal were sown.

Touched by an Angel's industrial positioning as a comforting, religious show and outlier to the rise in quality programming was the basis for CBS's and PAX's marketing. Both CBS and

PAX still sought a broad audience as opposed to quality audiences and their linkages to urban, affluent, white, and coastal elites. The connection between religious programming and middlebrow audiences solidified around *Touched by an Angel*. Johnson states, "CBS and PAX thus argue that they are the last true, populist, democratic American broadcasters whose mission is to serve a core audience of real, God-fearing Americans who have otherwise been 'forgotten' by America's 'elite' popular producers."[16] This "core audience of real, God-fearing Americans" is the basis of the mass audience imaginary. The construction of mass and the appeal to it, placed in opposition to quality elites, allowed emerging neo-network era broadcasters to acknowledge these viewers within a system that was "forgetting" the mass audience. Within the context of networks shifting toward more quality programming, practices such as employing overt religious representations, such as angels and explicit prayer, could signify acknowledgement of the middlebrow audience that other networks left behind in favor of edgy programming that did not align with the mass audience's assumed Christian cultural values.

Edgy and quality programming had been part of the broadcast landscape since at least *Hill Street Blues* in the 1980s, but a tipping point was being reached due in part to the influence and success of NBC's Must-See TV programs as well as some of cable's early, critically acclaimed original programming such as *The Larry Sanders Show* (HBO, 1992-1998) that was competing for the quality audience. *Touched by an Angel* represented a major television ratings and commercial success that featured religious representations at the core of its narrative. During its third through sixth seasons, it was in the top ten of Nielsen ratings.[17] In turn, it was can be placed in contrast to the rising prominence of elite tastes, audiences, and programs. Within the industry, CBS and PAX programmers and marketers defined *Touched by an Angel* in ways that

were not only outside of strategies of edge and upscale quality audience appeal, but antithetical to such strategies.[18]

For the idea of the audience that CBS and PAX were targeting via *Touched by an Angel* in the 1990s, quality equated with elitism. This popular versus elite binary was increasingly politicized not only in this case; more broadly, this was becoming one of the foundational tensions of the post-1980s culture wars in America. While the distinctions between high and low culture and the populations to which these forms appeal was far from new even at that time, the antipathy with which each side treated the other became increasingly aggressive and hostile in the 1990s. Certain types of popular, low, and middlebrow culture became rallying points for conservative Americans who saw American culture generally being led by the coastal elites toward a too-speedy shift in what it meant to be American, toward multiculturalism instead of the assimilationist melting pot and toward non-belief instead of one nation under God. *Touched by an Angel* spoke to a certain (white, Christian, lower-to-middle class) group's sense of being left out of the mass medium of television and provided a space for their perspective (and faith) to be heard and venerated.

The appeal to middle America and its middlebrow, conservative faith and tastes made commercial sense in the 1990s industrial context. Johnson notes that CBS's and PAX's success in the late 1990s were "as the only media outlets that speak for the post-1960s 'silent majority,' those presumed to occupy a figurative and literal, ideological and geographical, affective, tangible, devout American middle."[19] *Touched by an Angel*'s 1990s popularity and success, as well as its industrial position as anchor for both CBS and PAX-TV's middlebrow appeal in the neo-network era, situates it as a key turning point in how religious television was understood within the industry. Namely, it was linked to that "devout American middle," a middle that was

losing its value to marketers relative to other more finely tailored demographics. The show's articulation of religion through overt but vague (talk of God but not Jesus) religious messaging, aided by its "out" Christian creatives, was the basis for marketing it to religious audiences in opposition to elite audiences. The show marks a moment where the religious audience began to be cast as outsiders to the mainstream of television production and journalistic discourse about the industry. Then along came their own niche broadcaster in the form of PAX-TV, which was able to reclaim as religious a program not originally marketed as overtly religious when it aired on CBS. A similar set of circumstances – in which religion was a subject (and an audience) cast as outside of mainstream television production – recurs but with different resonances, in relation to *7th Heaven*.

ATTEMPTING TO AVOID "PREACHY" AND FAILING: *7TH HEAVEN*

7th Heaven (WB, 1996-2007) was the WB's top-rated program from 1999-2006, reaching as many as 12.5 million viewers, although this still usually placed it out of the top one hundred in Nielsen ratings.[20] As noted above, at the time of its premiere in 1996, netlet WB reached a narrower broadcast audience than its competitors and provided a more limited programming schedule. In addition, it was networked to fewer affiliate stations than the major broadcast networks. The WB, like the other young networks of the 1990s, built its success by appealing to a niche-mass hybrid audience, i.e., young adults. Jordan Levin, an executive at the WB while *7th Heaven* was developed and aired, described the show as a family series first and foremost. But, as he acknowledged, using the term "family" to market a drama was risky at the time. But with *7th Heaven*, the WB found a successful family drama in the lower-stakes world of netlet television broadcast.

7th Heaven was a teen-oriented family drama focused on a Protestant minister and his family. Eric Camden (Stephen Collins), his wife, Annie (Catherine Hicks), and their five (later, seven) children provided ample fodder over the course of eleven seasons of episodic narratives to tackle a variety of dramatic and topical storylines. The Camden children and their friends struggled—usually only for the length of an episode—with issues such as alcohol and drug use, sexual harassment, homelessness, abuse, and teen pregnancy. Unlike *Touched by an Angel*, *7th Heaven* did not make its overtly religious frame obvious in the first minutes of its pilot. Rather, the series' first episode spends its first act establishing the domestic setting and family dynamics: the romance between the parents, the teenage angst and puckish children, and the fact that this family is functional, as evidenced by shots of them saying grace and eating dinner together. Eric's vocation as a Protestant minister doesn't get mentioned until almost halfway through the episode, at which time it is treated like a reveal as a shot begins at the reverend's shoes and then pans up as he begins delivering a sermon. Each episode of the series, especially in the early seasons, tended to include at least one scene in the church. Most episodes centered around the Camden children—teenagers fitting the brand and demographic targeted by the WB—but with Annie and Eric as strong guiding figures. *7th Heaven* was a family drama first, a show about a Reverend second (but still significantly). These scenes usually had Reverend Camden delivering a homily that ties into the lessons learned by the Camden children (and the show's viewers). Like *Touched by an Angel*, the moralizing offered by each episodic narrative is framed by Christianity and its teachings. However, *7th Heaven,* unlike *Touched by an Angel,* used the family drama elements as its main narrative frame, with Christianity infused in subtle ways that more clearly reflected religious lived experience. Christianity was clearly a strong thread in the life of the Camden family, but it didn't define the Camdens in the same way that it did the angels of

Touched by an Angel. Of course, this is also the difference between a drama focused on supernatural figures like angels that are foundationally religious and a family drama more realist in its orientation.

Sometimes, the church aspects of the show drive an episode's plotline, as in episodes featuring the aftermath of arson at a nearby black church in the first season episode "The Color of God;" when one Camden daughter begins researching other religions in the first season episode, "Choices;" or when Reverend Camden's church's services are set to be televised in the season two episode, "Lead, Follow, or Get Out of the Way." These episodes, and the centrality of the church in their narratives, are exceptions to the general thrust of the show's episodic narratives. The thread of religion persists enough to make these episodes normal for the series and its characters but not the norm for the series as a whole. However, when a moral lesson is learned, whether in these more religiously oriented episodes or more standard storylines, especially one that is particularly controversial or clearly meant to be a moral message, it is often done in relation to Christianity. The religious framing gained by Reverend Camden's literal preaching turns after-school-special type of moralizing into preachy messaging in the discourse about the show.

While family-based television comedies such as the TGIF block on ABC in the early 1990s were extremely successful, Levin argued that producing a family drama was innovative and thus risky for the fledgling WB network. He said, "We knew we had to have a family series [but at that moment] family was a dirty word. It was considered a turn-off in that a family hour had not worked on television in over a generation."[21] However, the WB benefited both from its industrial position as a new netlet with lower ratings expectations than other networks as well as from the support of its Warner Bros. parent company, which helped defray costs of production

through vertical integration. Nonetheless, the association between religion and middlebrow established by *Touched by an Angel* had the potential to alienate the key target demographic of the WB: young, white adults. As noted above, religion already had become associated with middlebrow audiences and thus was perceived by creatives and executives as counter to the prevailing desire for edgy programming as it was developing in the neo-network era. With this show or others, the WB *could* have been a site for negotiating a new way of representing religion. Yet even representing religion in the least-objectionable middlebrow mode was seen as risky at the time for a new netlet largely dependent on affiliate cooperation and targeting a smaller but more affluent viewership. The WB did not want to alienate its affiliates in religious markets by presenting edgy religion, but its executives also did not want their youth-oriented channel to be perceived as similar to CBS in its programming or audience.

To further help mitigate any potential risk associated with broadcasting a "religious show," the WB executives brought Aaron Spelling in to serve as producer. Then the WB executives sought a writer to package with him for the project. Levin thought Brenda Hampton (*Mad About You*) would be a good choice because her history with sitcom writing would contribute character and humor as well as drama. Moreover, Levin states, "I knew she was from the South, from Georgia. I thought that sensibility would be important" and mesh well with Spelling, who was a Texan.[22] Even though the show was not set in the American South, Levin sensed that being Southern would help when crafting a family series. He doesn't say that he thought that because he associates Christianity or "heartland" values with the South, but it was implied in the context of our conversation.

The use of the American South as a touchstone in *7th Heaven's* development became evident when Levin cited *The Andy Griffith Show* as a model for the show. The creatives

developing the WB's new family drama liked that Andy was both a father at home and a father figure to the town in his role as small-town sheriff, and that balance between familial and social patriarchal roles was the core dramatic tension they wanted *7th Heaven* to explore. Through this confluence of Southernness, religion, and the presumed middlebrow family audience, the WB contributed to cultivating a production environment open to representing Christianity on television, but only within a certain context: namely as non-edgy (no cursing, little to no violence, traditional sound-stage based aesthetics), thereby linking this program to older models of TV religion including *Touched by an Angel*. The association of religion and Southernness cued by the interest in *The Andy Griffith Show* continued in the post-network era with Southern realist dramas that reacted in opposition to this earlier means of presentation and will be examined in the next chapter.

Within this industrial and creative environment, Jamie Kellner, the CEO of the network, introduced *7th Heaven*'s main religious element: that the patriarch of the family be a pastor. Levin described how the premise developed from there:

> We pitched that to Brenda and Aaron, not knowing what they'd think. We said, "We don't want this to be a *preachy* show with a religious agenda. We just think it's an interesting juxtaposition to have this dad struggling with just being a father while also being viewed as someone who, in people's eyes, is supposed to be held to a higher standing." We didn't know how [producers Aaron Spelling and Brenda Hampton] would react. Brenda said, "Well, can I write the character in a way that I really want to? [Do you want] this character to be very upright and upstanding? Is this a religious motivation, or is this purely dramatic?" [the WB executives responded:] "It's purely dramatic."[23]

This neo-network era negotiation of preachiness highlights a number of themes about religious representation that recur in the discourses about producing religious representation on television throughout this study, at least until around 2015. There was and generally remains a fear on the part of creatives and executives of a negative reaction from the public: fear of being seen as disrespectful to believers, fear of alienating young and hip viewers, and fear for the writers of being seen as less creative if their work is religious. This was and remains the case even for writers who are Southerners and therefore familiar with the Christian context; Brenda Hampton is just one example. Similarly, executives voiced concern about the producers' reaction, indicating that religion's risky status in the Hollywood television industry had already taken hold by the mid-1990s. The perception that being seen as preachy is dangerous and to be avoided was already a part of the naturalized ideology affecting dramatic television production by 1996—a point that is somewhat surprising given that the development of *7th Heaven* overlaps with *Touched by an Angel*'s first seasons. The connection between preachy and religious messaging, and the implication that such messaging was antithetical to good dramatic writing, can be strongly inferred from Brenda Hampton's reaction. In many ways, this one anecdote told by Levin captures and illustrates a chain of logic that recurs in prime-time Hollywood dramatic storytelling for the next several decades: religion automatically makes writers and executives think of preachiness; being preachy is bad, as it is associated with a faith-based religious agenda and antithetical to what constitutes good drama; and being preachy is risky because most writers, producers, and executives are likely to worry about each others' reactions to using religion in a dramatic narrative. The majority of writers and executives I spoke to had already internalized the ideology of religion as taboo at most, and risky and needing distancing at least. There is little

sense of what these creatives think will be the result of using religion or being seen as religious within their industrial communities, merely that it was and remains something to be avoided.

To the last point, it is fascinating that Kellner, according to Levin, had the initial idea to give the show a Christian context and premise. This choice, however, can be seen as compatible with Kellner's history of making high-risk programming decisions. Kellner was an executive at the Fox network during its first seven years (1987-1994) until he left to found the WB in 1994.[24] His transition from Fox to the WB provided a through-line in terms of network strategies: there were several similarities in terms of how the WB pursued early viewers and what Fox previously had done. Both initially targeted African-American viewers only to then transition to appealing to young white adults. Indeed, Kellner even went so far as to bring in Aaron Spelling as a key figure in each network's ascent, with *Beverly Hills, 90210* in the case of Fox (1990-2000) and *7th Heaven* for the WB. In addition to reproducing the same audience targeting and programming strategies, Kellner's role in the WB's origin story also underscores the high risk-high reward consideration of representing religion on a prime-time drama. Such risk-taking is only available to someone in as high a position of power as a CEO who need not worry as much as middle executives or writers about job security or ostracization. Even with this as the case for Kellner, the idea of focusing on a pastor was still somewhat contained religious representation. Kellner displayed more flexibility within the ideology of religion-as-risk, but only when compared to the self-policing and avoidance generally displayed by writers and mid-level executives of the time.

7th Heaven's success countered the assumed risk Levin discussed of producing family dramas and dramas with a religious element to their premise. The religious risk, though overcome in the exemplary case of *7th Heaven*, was not built upon in the WB's subsequent programming, whereas family dramas such as *Gilmore Girls* (2000-2007) and *Everwood* (2002-

2006) would become key to the WB's brand. *7th Heaven* was a success, but one that contrasted with the hegemonic ideology and thus was not incorporated into dominant practices and tastes.[25] Indeed, religion continued to be perceived by executives and creatives alike as a risky subject. Levin said of his experience of producing religion on television in the 1990s and broadcast television more generally:

> It was unwritten for a while that you don't want to touch [on religion] directly . . . Within that [commercial broadcast] world if it was front and center, that could be alienating to some people, let alone being controversial . . . Drama is driven by conflict and characters' journeys. Arcs are driven by vulnerabilities, so if you're going to do something around religion, but you didn't want to risk offending people to the point that advertisers dropped out and stations would drop out, what kind of stories are you going to tell? They end up being incredibly *preachy* and the characters would be very one note. So if you really wanted to dig in [to religion], inherently you knew [that] was going to create these obstacles.[26]

Levin suggests that dependence on advertisers and affiliates led religion to be reduced to being presented in a "preachy" fashion. Preachiness is antithetical to what creatives want to present and be known for, and it also adversely affects channel brands, such as the WB, that depend on differentiating themselves from the undesirable middlebrow audience. Both of these assumptions still hold water in later decades but find their solidification in the 1990s. Levin did not connect this observation to *7th Heaven* directly, and in fact doesn't even seem to realize that he could have been talking about the show.

The case of *7th Heaven* illustrates how industrial and cultural factors can figure into a show's development in politically loaded ways. In its initial development, executives and

producers thought they were creating a show that used religion to distinguish itself from the risk of producing a family drama without dysfunction. What it became during its eleven years on the air in the public discourse about it was what the creatives and executives had initially tried to avoid: an "uncool," middlebrow, and preachy show.[27] My analysis of *7th Heaven* and its industrial positioning underscores the unwritten rule enacted by creatives and executives within the 1990s-era neo-network era: religion is not a subject that can employed to give a show edge. Levin's observation of this unwritten rule in commercial broadcast reinforces the idea that, in the period before the 2003-2016 boom, religious programming rarely appeared unless it was articulated to preachiness. Thus, in the 1990s, we see established the connection between religion and preachiness within television industrial discourses; subsequently, that connection increasingly ossified as undesirable in terms of both audience targeting and creatives' cultural ideology.

A pattern that I discovered throughout my interviews with individuals involved in producing series in the post-network era was that religion can be known mainly by its abnegation. Writers and executives know what they mean by describing their shows as not religious but they don't have a vocabulary other than preachy to describe religious. The belief of these writers and executives in the neo-network era that preachy cannot also mean good or quality has persisted and indeed reached the status of industry lore. This lore is so strong and so wedded to shows like *Touched by an Angel* and *7th Heaven* that creatives need not—and likely did not—even watch the shows to react against them. The paratextual discourse around these shows was strong enough to ossify connections among religion, preachiness, and middlebrow audiences and tastes. This legacy of neo-network era production cultures' understanding of religious representations on mainstream television has been kept alive in the post-network era.

Such an understanding is visible, for example, through shows that can be seen as part of *Touched by an Angel*'s legacy: namely, Biblical adaptations spearheaded by Roma Downey and her husband's production companies: One Three Media and Lightworkers Media.

Touched by an Angel's Post-Network Descendants: United Artists Media Group's Biblical Projects

Although disdained by much of the Hollywood creative community, the lineage of *Touched by an Angel* and *7th Heaven* continued (as did the shows), albeit more sporadically, in the post-network era with such preachy dramas such as *The Secret Life of the American Teenager* (ABC Family, 2008-2013) and *Heartland* (UP, 2007-). Particularly notable was a resurgence of Biblical adaptations in the early 2010s. Most of these Biblical productions were developed through Roma Downey's production company, Lightworkers Media, and are a byproduct of her high-profile status as a Christian in the television industry. In 2013, Downey and her husband, *Survivor* and *The Apprentice* producer Mark Burnett, launched a miniseries adaptation of The Bible (both the Old and New Testaments), securing the History Channel as distributor. *The Bible* miniseries began with Noah (David Rintoul) on the Arc, recounting the creation story, and each episode features dramatic adaptations of a handful of Biblical stories. Of the ten-hour miniseries, the first five hours were devoted to the Old Testament and the last five hours adapted the New Testament. According to producer Brian Edwards, *The Bible* was pitched as a good fit for that cable network due to its "measure of historicity . . . That these people [in the Bible] actually existed."[28]

The Bible was a huge ratings success for the History Channel and its emergent twenty-first century brand, averaging 13.1 million viewers.[29] In the early 2010s, History Channel was second only to ESPN in cable rankings of male viewers, a brand it built on reality shows like *American Pickers* (2010-) and miniseries such as *Hatfields and McCoys* (2012).[30] *The Bible's*

success expanded History's appeal to a religious audience while maintaining the male demographic it targeted before. *The Bible* was a gritty historical drama in look and tone, much like *Hatfields and McCoys,* but with an overtly religious story. Edwards was an executive producer on *The Bible* and, at the time of the interview, was Chief Operating Officer of United Artist Media Group, which was formed in 2014 from the partnership of Mark Burnett's One Three Media (co-owned by Hearst Group) and MGM and which includes Downey's faith-based Lightworkers Media.[31]

Edwards argued that the success of *The Bible* resulted from the following production choices: 1) the decision to do what they called an "unvarnished adaptation [of the Old and New Testaments]. . . [Like] a modern version of a stained glass window" with "authenticity and quality" that would separate it from others that had sanitized or dramatized Biblical stories; 2) the decision to include Christian leaders at the script stage to ensure the faith foundation was strong; and 3) the decision to target the appeal of the miniseries in a "coherent and direct line of sight to a large audience" of heartland viewers.[32] Burnett, Downey, et. al. are Christians of strong faith, committed to making media with a faith-based agenda (and publicizing that agenda). They present themselves as identifying directly with their audience. There is no attempt within these adaptations to contain religion geographically, generically, through displacing onto the source text, or within the culture of Hollywood – all key traits of post-network era boom programming to be discussed in subsequent chapters. *The Bible* is a religious miniseries, targeting—at least partially—a religious audience, drawing from a Christian text, and created by Christian producers for evangelical purposes.

The Bible was the first in a mini-boom of historically oriented shows dealing overtly with Jesus or Biblical stories and acknowledging their religiousness. This mini-boom features shows

that are preachy in much the same way *Touched by an Angel* was perceived: religious moralizing from religious creatives. "One success begets another in relatively quick succession," Edwards claimed by way of explaining what followed *The Bible*. For example, The National Geographic Channel decided to follow up their well-rated nonfiction specials (not affiliated with UAMG), *Killing Kennedy* and *Killing Lincoln* with *Killing Jesus*, which was aggressively marketed ahead of its airing on Palm Sunday of 2015.[33]

Following *The Bible's* success, United Artist Media Group began developing their own slate of Biblically themed dramas and miniseries, including *A.D.: The Bible Continues* (2015), an adaptation of early Christian history and the establishment of the Church following Jesus' death and ascension, and a female-focused Biblical epic miniseries for CBS, *The Dovekeepers* (2015).[34] *A.D.* was billed as a sequel to *The Bible,* but it appeared on broadcaster NBC. It was meant to appeal to that "direct line of sight to a large audience" that Edwards and others attributed to *The Bible*'s success, and yet *A.D.* was on a broadcast network, the miniseries still had to appeal to a broad audience, including those who might be non-religious. NBC developed the series and began airing it on Easter Sunday of 2015 in a clear nod to its potential religious audience.[35] However, *A.D.* did not attract or sustain the anticipated mass audience, suggesting that the mass Christian audience that made *Touched by an Angel* a success in the neo-network era really might no longer exist—or at least be harder to reach—in the post-network era, especially within the parameters of broadcast television.

Producers at UAMG embraced the religious aspects of both *The Bible* and *A.D.* because they saw the religious audience as vast and underserved, just as they had been in the 1990s when *Touched by an Angel* and PAX-TV sought to capitalize on them. Edwards told me that the network partner for each show, History and NBC respectively, took the overall responsibility of

marketing the shows to a general audience, but that, led by Mark Burnett and Downey, UAMG did supplemental marketing to Christian groups with their in-house team. With both *The Bible* and *A.D.*, Burnett and Downey traveled to a variety of faith communities and met with faith leaders across the United States to build the Christian audience of their series. Burnett explained his business strategy with these shows in a *Hollywood Reporter* op-ed around the time of the launch of *A.D.* The op-ed makes an industrial argument informed by religious belief. He maintains that the Christian audience is a mass audience that will watch religious content if it is respectful. He adds, "Content that tries to disprove Christianity tends to fail, content that alters what Christians believe is 'God's story' tends to fall short, but content that honors that story tends to be well-received. It's just that simple."[36] It is worth noting that based on Burnett's evangelism and his company's work to appeal directly to religious audiences, it is likely that he believes the mass Christian audience can supplant (or even convert some of) the confederation of secular demographics that form the audience norm in post-network industry practices. This remains unclear based on the limited sample of programming available.

Burnett's op-ed and his Biblical adaptations represent an extreme example of support for preachy dramas in such a way that fortifies the connection between religious and preachy and the latter's connotation of religious messaging from religious producers. He tried resurrecting the *Touched by an Angel* legacy in a contemporary industry context in which most creative figures and executives had internalized that legacy as in conflict with their creative and business goals. The Christian audience is broad, not narrow, as Burnett rightly points out. However, that breadth follows a mass audience mentality that is now seen as antiquated or out-of-sync with contemporary industry imperatives. Burnett, in effect, is basically trying to target a heartland audience in an era where that audience has lost focus and favor within the industry because it is

constructed as anathema to upscale audiences that are increasingly desirable, even on broadcast networks. Without the demographic narrowness that allows for upscale audience targeting, such an audience is less and less desirable for the television industry.

Although Burnett and Downey's Biblical adaptations represent one way in which preachy shows have continued into the 21st century, their attempts to turn programs with explicit religious agendas into mainstream commercial successes have failed for the most part and been discussed as failures within industry discourse.[37] That failure has helped to strengthen the stigma associated with overtly religious and preachy drama and perpetuates the legacy of religious dramas as undesirable creative and industrial endeavors. The success of *The Bible* is forgotten in the wake of the inability to translate that niche history-oriented success into a program with wider appeal on network television.

CONCLUSION

Touched by an Angel and *7th Heaven* were two successful religious dramas that aired in the years immediately preceding the 2003-2016 boom in religious dramas. These shows, and the Biblical adaptations produced more recently, exemplify the characteristics of preachy dramas and illustrate how that pejorative sensibility came to construct religion as something to be avoided among creatives. Preachiness includes: having a religious message that appeals to middlebrow/mass taste cultures and audiences and being defined in opposition to quality television with its cinematic aesthetics, distinct stylistic traits, complex serialized narratives, and multidimensional, often antiheroic, characters. Since 2003, writers, producers, executives, and marketers of dramas featuring religion have regularly used the concept of preachy as a means of

understanding and communicating what they are *not* doing. Preachy has come to be considered antithetical to their creative ambitions and to what constitutes good television.

Because preachy shows were the most prominent representations of religion prior to the 2003-2016 boom, among creatives, preachy had overtaken the meaning of religious when referring to television dramas. When people in the mainstream Hollywood industry say religious they mean preachy and vice versa. The negative associations with both terms created an environment in which it was difficult to imagine religious without the negative, middlebrow, moralizing connotations it gained in the 1990s. In mainstream production culture, even during the boom of religious representation, a show that featured religious representation was assumed to be preachy and therefore not good or commercially viable in the post-network era and its reliance on upscale audiences. In the following chapters, I investigate a variety of containment strategies designed to make religious shows safe from the specter of preachy.

---

[1] Thomas Mallon and Pankaj Mishra, "Highbrow, Lowbrow, Middlebrow — Do These Kinds of Cultural Categories Mean Anything Anymore?," *The New York Times*, July 29, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/03/books/review/highbrow-lowbrow-middlebrow-do-these-kinds-of-cultural-categories-mean-anything-anymore.html.

[2] While the WB straddled mass and niche distinctions as a netlet, it was aimed toward a multi-generational broad audience as a "family drama" (discussed below). It used mass-appeal broadcast shows such as *Eight is Enough* and *The Andy Griffith Show* as inspiration and was the highest-rated WB show for most of its run. Thus, I situate it as mass-audience-oriented similar to *Touched by an Angel*.

[3] It is the case that certain shows did go narrower, of course, and the quality TV discourse did start with broadcast.

[4] Victoria E. Johnson, "Welcome Home?: CBS, PAX-TV, and 'Heartland' Values in a Neo-Network Era," *Velvet Light Trap: A Critical Journal Of Film & Television*, no. 46 (Fall 2000).

[5] Susanne Daniels and Cynthia Littleton, *Season Finale: The Unexpected Rise and Fall of the WB and UPN* (New York: Harper Collins, 2007), 109.

[6] Ibid., 94.

[7] Ibid., 109.

[8] Victoria E. Johnson, "Welcome Home?," 40.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Ibid., 48.

[11] Ibid., 45.

[12] Ibid., 40.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Ibid., 40.
[15] Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984), 6.
[16] Victoria E. Johnson, "Welcome Home?," 41.
[17] "Touched by an Angel," *Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia*, June 20, 2016, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Touched_by_an_Angel&oldid=726176089.
[18] Ibid, 42.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Elizabeth Jensen, "WB's '7th Heaven' a Hush-Hush Hit," *Los Angeles Times*, February 22, 1999, http://articles.latimes.com/1999/feb/22/entertainment/ca-10415.
[21] Jordan Levin, personal interview, October 16, 2014.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Jamie Kellner, *Bloomberg*, http://www.bloomberg.com/research/stocks/people/person.asp?personId=236338&ticker=ACME
[25] Todd Gitlin, "Prime Time Ideology: The Hegemonic Process of Television Entertainment," in *Television: The Critical View / Edited by Horace Newcomb*, ed. Horace Newcomb (New York : Oxford University Press, 2000., 2000), 531.
[26] Levin interview.
[27] Jensen.
[28] Brian Edwards, telephone interview, April 21, 2015.
[29] Rick Kissell, "History Scores Big With 'The Bible' and 'The Vikings,'" Variety, March 4, 2013, http://variety.com/2013/tv/ratings/history-scores-big-with-the-bible-and-the-vikings-1200002918/.
[30] Carol Memmott, "History Channel Comes out Shootin'," *USA Today*, accessed March 31, 2016.
[31] Samantha Highfill, "MGM Is Once Again Launching the United Artists Media Group | EW.com," September 22, 2014, http://www.ew.com/article/2014/09/22/mgm-united-artists-media-group.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Patrick Hipes, "'Killing Jesus' Premiere Date Set For March 29 On Nat Geo - Full Trailer," *Deadline*, February 18, 2015, http://deadline.com/2015/02/killing-jesus-premiere-date-trailer-national-geographic-channel-1201375969/.
[34] Cynthia Littleton, "Roma Downey Pursues Passion Projects, 'Bible' Sequel With LightWorkers Banner," *Variety*, September 17, 2013, http://variety.com/2013/biz/news/roma-downey-pursues-passion-projects-bible-sequel-with-lightworkers-banner-1200614054/.
[35] Anthony D'Alessandro, "Jerusalem A Dangerous Place After Christ In NBC's 'A.D.' - Trailer," *Deadline*, November 29, 2014, http://deadline.com/2014/11/a-d-video-nbc-miniseries-life-after-jesus-christ-death-1201302212/.
[36] Mark Burnett, "Mark Burnett Op-Ed: 'A.D.' Producer on Faith and Hollywood," *The Hollywood Reporter*, April 3, 2015, http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/mark-burnett-op-ed-ad-786225.

[37] Kissell, Rick. "Ratings: 'A.D. The Bible Continues' Drops Off, But Still Tops Demos." *Variety*, April 13, 2015. http://variety.com/2015/data/news/a-d-the-bible-continues-ratings-week-2-1201471277/.

Chapter Two Geographic Displacement: Christianity, Quality, and Southern Authenticity

CHRISTIANITY IN QUALITY REPRESENTATIONS OF THE AUTHENTIC SOUTH

The majority of programs discussed in this dissertation belong to fantastic genres, horror, science fiction, or fantasy. Possible reasons for this will be discussed in later chapters. Nonetheless, there are some programs that are situated outside such fantastic genres. Though far fewer in number than the fantastic programs which are the focus of discussion for the rest of this dissertation, some realist dramas such as *Friday Night Lights* (NBC, 2006-2011) and *Rectify* (SundanceTV, 2013-) have made religion a focal point in their storytelling. By virtue of their shared realist genres, these shows throw the reaction against preachy dramas into stark relief. *Friday Night Lights* began airing a full decade after *7th Heaven* began, but their runs overlapped for one year. As discussed in the previous chapter, *7th Heaven* anchored the middlebrow appeal of a religious realist drama in 2006. This positioning meant that shows that had religious narratives and were aiming for quality, such as *Friday Night Lights,* needed to differentiate their use of religion. This need was answered in the pattern of geographical displacement of Christianity onto the American South and its culture occurring in two shows that span the length of the boom, from *Friday Night Lights* in the mid-2000s to *Rectify* in the 2010s. This emphasis on religion as a Southern cultural marker has become a means of distinguishing them as quality programming.

Both *Friday Night Lights* and *Rectify* use a Southern American setting to tell the story of characters responding to the presence and impact of Christianity. These shows present a spectrum of belief from atheism to born-again devotion but always within the imagined Southern

Christian culture. This Southern setting also provides a way to differentiate them from the aforementioned preachy shows such as *7th Heaven* and *Touched by an Angel* that featured religion. Thus, this chapter serves as a transition from the preachy prehistory of the 1990s to the practices of ideologically distancing religious representation and the creatives who use it in their work from that earlier era and its association with middlebrow tastes. Unlike later chapters, this chapter's case studies and writers acknowledge the religiousness and specific Christianity of religion as it's represented in their work, but the writers nonetheless distance themselves from that religion by pushing it wholly onto Southern culture.

Displacing religion onto the South enabled the writers of *Friday Night Lights* and *Rectify* to engage with religion as part of a cultural other, protecting creatives from being thought of as religious. Significantly, the background of the majority of the imagined quality TV audience as well as the background of the writers and producers of the shows under consideration differed substantially from the imagined Southern audience, although each show had at least one Southern writer to act as the arbiter of authenticity. The imagined audience as well as the creatives involved with the two shows that are the subject of this chapter tended to be coastal, affluent, educated, and not particularly religious (or imagined themselves in this manner). As such, the rural, poor, Christian South was outside their experience.

Quality realist dramas, such as *Hill Street Blues* (NBC, 1981-1987) and *Lou Grant* (CBS, 1977-1982), have a long history of exploring controversial and timely content, often gaining a quality designation from journalists and critics through such explorations.[1] But in the creative practices that dominated during the post-network era, religion has been set apart from other controversial content such as violence, drug use, and non-normative sexualities and genders. Religion remains normally separate, other, and risky because of the assumptions made by the

industry regarding taste and demographics associated with the quality audience. Within this context, religion needed to be displaced to make it safe within industry ideology. The claim of Southern authenticity provided that displacement within realist genre expectations and quality aesthetics. Both realism and authenticity, it should be noted, are constructions within the realm of fictional television, used to legitimate certain dramatic stories and brand particular shows as quality.

Friday Night Lights and *Rectify* are two of the best examples of the alignment of quality realism with Southern authenticity in the post-network era. This alignment uses Christianity as a cultural anchor for the characters and as a marker of regional difference for the writers, producers, and assumed audience. Through case studies of these two shows, this chapter investigates the representation of religion within the aesthetic of what I call Southern realism, which draws from both the Southern gothic tradition and the indie film culture tradition.[2] I explicate what that term means below, but in broad strokes, Southern realism generally uses quality aesthetics such as dynamic camera work, naturalistic lighting, on-location shooting, and realistic dialogue, to represent the American South authentically. Such representational practices operate both in terms of quality audience targeting and in providing cultural capital within the television industry to writers working on these shows that both allows for overt religious representation and ideologically necessitates its containment. The mode of Southern realism allows writers, executives, producers, and marketers to discuss their work with religion without fearing that they will be perceived as necessarily religious by their industry peers. The fear of being seen as religious that dominates mainstream Hollywood industry culture and production practices is mitigated when it is displaced onto the geographically other American South. This particular containment practice of distancing creates a paradox in which authentically

representing the American South necessitates representing Christianity, while writers, producers, executives, and marketers working on these shows discursively downplay or dismiss the religiousness of their show.

SOUTHERN REALISM AND QUALITY

Southern realism, as I articulate it, is an evolution of the earlier Southern gothic, a mode seen in William Faulkner's novels, Flannery O'Connor's short stories, and myriad media texts such as *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Mulligan, 1962), *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* (Eastwood, 1997), *The Gift* (Raimi, 2000), and *True Blood* (HBO, 2008-2014). In both Southern realism and Southern gothic—particularly the latter's literary strain—there is a preoccupation with Southern Christianity; the gothic's excess has given way to an understated mode of storytelling in the new Southern realist television programs. Many of Southern gothic's narrative foci, such as religion, class, and race, remain present in Southern realism, but they are represented quite differently. Although Southern realism as I construct it is not necessarily television specific, television's ability to approach these foci over many hours of a season or series and its resulting ongoing relationship with its audience allows for extensive and subtle explorations of religion, class, and race. The mode and medium combine to produce "classic American realism . . . the painstaking, almost literal examination of middle-and working-class lives."[3] To facilitate this turn to realism, horror as a principle modal framework in Southern gothic is replaced with indie in Southern realism. In his study of cinematic depictions of Southern religion, Bradley Shaw identifies features of the Southern gothic mode found in the works of writers, of both fiction and non-fiction, such as William Faulkner and Erskine Caldwell:

> This younger generation of Southerners' shocking representations of sex, violence, religious excess, rural poverty, a degenerate aristocracy, and the legacy of racial hatred undercut traditional romantic images of the South and established regional tropes and stereotypes that were corroborated by the social analysis of non-fiction writers like W. J. Cash and H. L. Mencken.[4]

Shaw went on to explore how this mode of representing the South changed as it filtered into other media representations of the Southern gothic. In his study of *To Kill a Mockingbird*'s 1962 film adaptation, Shaw concluded that the film version de-emphasized religion in favor of race. He writes, "In accounting for this terror in 'black & white,' [i.e., a focus on race] the film makers seemed to have no appetite for portraying the pervasive character of Southern evangelical Protestantism or the gothic's exploration of its excesses."[5] Whereas Shaw argues that the film's popular representation of the South had little place for religious themes central to the source material, conversely, the Southern realist television programs I discuss in this chapter restore religion to the center of media representations of the American South as it had been in the Southern gothic's literary expressions. In Southern realism's drive for authentically representing the South, the cultural dominance of Southern Christianity becomes a key feature of the setting and cultural context for its dramas' characters and their stories.

As noted above, where the Southern gothic mode was influenced by horror, Southern realism draws its emphasis on authenticity from indie film culture. As Michael Z. Newman articulates indie, it is a cultural construct formed in opposition to the mainstream, "a form of cinema that is constantly being distinguished from another one which is more popular and commercially significant, but less culturally legitimate."[6] Newman goes on to describe:

> The ideal of independent cinema is as an authentic, autonomous alternative. Authentic, insofar as a film is recognized to be the sincere production of an artist or group of artists. Autonomous, to the extent that the artist or group of artists is free to pursue their personal agenda and not constrained by business demands. And alternative, as the authenticity and autonomy of the film and its production is regarded as a contrast to the dominant process for making movies, which is the Hollywood studio way.[7]

The emphasis on authenticity and alterity are the two guiding principles defining quality television as that idea has evolved in the twenty-first century. As Sarah Banet-Weiser theorizes in her book *AuthenticTM*, authenticity is both a "cultural space defined by branding and a relationship between consumers and branders."[8] For some shows and networks, autonomy of the production culture in relationship to the network becomes a way to build a distinct authentic brand. SundanceTV, in particular, builds its brand by emphasizing its willingness to cede control to its showrunners. SundanceTV brands itself as a channel for television auteurs, a claim that draws directly from indie cinema culture. Moreover, quality television, like indie cinema, distinguishes itself through a process of legitimation by contrasting its modes of production and content from regular television. Whereas film situates the mainstream with the major Hollywood studios, television legitimation situates broadcast television and its construction as middlebrow in opposition to quality.[9] The confluence of claims of authenticity, alterity, and occasionally autonomy inform the quality designation of Southern realism, which in turn enables the representation of religion within these shows. As David Hudgins, a writer and producer on *Friday Night Lights* characterized its production culture: "We were always conscious to be true to Texas," including its religious culture.[10] The truth of Texas required a realist approach.

Scholars and critics consider both *Friday Night Lights* and *Rectify* to be quality dramas.[11] As Victoria Johnson notes, at first *Friday Night Lights* was discursively constructed as having mass—or as she puts it, "heartland"—appeal. Its stories of football, family, and the struggles of small-town life seemed custom fit for heartland appeal. Only after the show failed to attract the heartland (and teen) audiences it was initially targeted toward did programmers and marketers shift to discursively constructing it as quality.[12] This construction of regional identity/geographic myth undergirds one way that the American television industry imagines its audience: the quality audience and the heartland audience are assumed to be mutually exclusive. Johnson writes:

> Indeed, in spite of the broadly "purple" realities of American history—thrown into stark relief in the Obama era—demographic market definitions, industry promotions, and journalistic critical discourses remain characterized by a cultural and conceptual lag that imagine the American consumer, viewer, and polity as divided according to red state versus blue state identifications and their corresponding imagined capital relations.[13]

Johnson's work within the field of media studies has made great inroads with regard to her stated goal of bringing regional identity into consideration, and this chapter aids in that endeavor by critically engaging with the ways that religion is used to construct the geographical myth of the real South, while simultaneously fetishizing it for the idea of a quality audience for whom Southern culture, including religion, is believed to be other.

Like Johnson, I use *Friday Night Lights* as a key case study because of its transitional industrial and representational position between heartland subjects and Southern realist aesthetics. The show uses several heartland clichés, including: football, small town/rural setting, strong family values, and religion as a part of life and community to cue the audience to its "true" representation of the South. Meanwhile, these representations are situated in quality

aesthetics of realism including naturalistic dialogue, dynamic-camera on-location filming, and a general pursuit of an aesthetics of authenticity derived from existing indie filmmaking conventions. *Friday Night Lights* set the model of Southern realism that other quality realist shows like *Rectify* follow. These two shows qualify as case studies or religious dramas because of their overt representation of normative Southern Christianity. Other shows that could be considered Southern realist but would not qualify as case studies include *Justify* (FX, 2010-2015) and *True Detective* (HBO, 2014-). While these two shows did represent the American South as Christian, when religious representation appeared it was as non-normative modes of Christianity such as snake-handling and Christian-based cults. Such religious representation is othering to such an extreme that it no longer is perceived as ideologically threatening; it is outside the realm of the Christian norm that is the foundation for understanding religion as preachy.

Johnson's main objective in *Heartland TV* involves calling for greater scholarly attention to how regionalism and regional mythology connect to assumptions about target audiences. She writes, "*Heartland TV* considers regionalism in regard to the conceptualization of television's audience, and interrogates the critical valuation of the imagined Heartland audience as crucially bound up with broader discourses regarding taste, market differentiation, and the politics of social value."[14] In this chapter, my critical intervention into this conceptualization is that the creatives and marketers of these Southern realist shows are in fact *not* trying to appeal to a Southern or heartland audience. Rather, the heartland audience is largely subsumed within the imaginary of the middlebrow audience and the attendant non-quality textual strategies with which the preachy shows of chapter one are associated. The American South and its attendant characters and culture are the objects of these shows but not the target audience, contrary to Johnson's study. While the Southern realist shows *Friday Night Lights* and *Rectify* represent

subjects associated with the heartland audience such as religion, their writers' and executives' geographic displacement of those subjects within quality notions of authenticity help ensure these shows and their creatives are not considered preachy and thus middlebrow.

HEARTLAND SUBJECTS, QUALITY AUDIENCE: *FRIDAY NIGHT LIGHTS*

Friday Night Lights pioneered Southern realism, particularly as a marker of quality. Beyond its use of quality aesthetics, it was considered exceptional by critics, scholars, and its own writers in featuring heartland subjects.[15] This was especially the case because it aired on broadcast television at a time when broadcast was increasingly considered a site for non-quality programming, discussed further below. *Friday Night Lights*' narrative focused on the small-town stakes and the encompassing culture of high school football in the Texas town of Dillon. The series' main characters included the Taylor family—football coach Eric (Kyle Chandler), guidance counselor Tami (Connie Britton), and their daughter Julie (Aimee Teegarden)—and the various football players and their families who cycled through and around the football teams, the Dillon Panthers and the East Dillon Lions. These players included: town tomcat Tim Riggins (Taylor Kitsch); artist, quarterback, and Julie's love interest Matt Saracen (Zach Gilford); talented and driven Brian "Smash" Williams (Gaius Charles); paralyzed former quarterback Jason Street (Scott Porter); and Christian rocker and eventual kicker, Landry Clark (Jesse Plemons). All the characters struggle with the gravitational pull of small-town, working-class life in Dillon despite their on-field prowess that is the usual ticket to the wider world. And they all attend church. Christianity is portrayed as a natural part of the town culture even if it is a culture that is largely assumed by the creative and executives involved to be alien to the *Friday Night Lights* target quality audience.

Friday Night Lights' industrial context is unique as a transitional show. It began its run on NBC and was initially marketed to the middlebrow mass audience. Johnson notes, "Almost all of the original television advertisements for the series were placed in NBC's fall football telecasts. Specifically, by linking *Friday Night Lights* with NBC's *Football Night in America* . . . NBC explicitly promoted F*riday Night Lights* as red state, heartland TV."[16] When it failed to attract that target audience and instead critics began hailing the show as an exceptional-for-broadcast quality drama, NBC repositioned it as such.[17] Throughout, the mode of representation and the production culture behind it remained within the legacy practices of quality television designations so its repositioning as quality did not affect the show's representational logics. For the show's final two years, NBC and satellite television company DirecTV partnered to ensure that the show stayed on the air, even if its episodes initially aired on DirecTV's niche subscriber-only channel. This was likely viable due to the removal of the fin/syn rules, granting NBC more aftermarket value for the show as its financer. *Friday Night Lights* ultimately ran for five seasons on broadcast television, where its creatives used its quality television designations to contain its middlebrow subjects, including religion.

Key to the notion of Southern realism is that those who praise it in popular media criticism and within the industry often do so as outsiders looking into that culture. There is an assumed degree of distance for most of those in the quality audience, which is constructed as liberal, coastal elites. Thus, Southern realism is conferred through authorial branding and the judgment of outsiders. Realism, like quality, is not an objective term. Those who deem a fiction presented as realistic must have the cultural power to do so, and that power is not necessarily tied to experience within the represented culture. Within the context of the Southern realist shows, the majority of creatives working on those shows are not Southern. The few that are fill the role

of token, although likely unconsciously done. As *Friday Night Lights* executive producer and writer David Hudgins told me, he was often called on as the authority on the South because he grew up in Texas. However, he said his descriptions of the South—such as the practice of weekly church attendance—were often met with incredulity by the other writers.[18] Examples like this illustrate a degree of othering and a fascination with Southern culture among the Hollywood television industry's writers and producers. The regionalism in *Southern* realism must be emphasized to enable the use of its othered nature in containment strategies. The target audience, or at least the assumed target audience, for these shows are in fact not inhabitants of the milieu it presents. But in order to harness that appeal, the Southernness represented by the show must seem "authentic." Such authenticity, however, was deemed so by writers and by the target quality audience that was constructed as outside the culture. Jason Katims, *Friday Night Lights*' showrunner, described as "a Brooklyn native with little interest in football" by critic Alan Sepinwall, told that critic:

> The thing that stood out about the pilot [of *Friday Night Lights*] is what I hear that people generally responded to in the show: how authentic it felt. It felt like I was in this town. It was as if somebody dropped you into this town and you were there. That's what was so exciting about it. The sense of place was so specific, and the sense of this community felt so real, and the people that were in it felt so real.[19]

Katims claims authenticity as the foundation of the show's appeal, not necessarily claiming it as an outsider but instead letting viewers do that work for him. However, as discussed above, *Friday Night Lights* had a difficult time appealing to the heartland and Southern viewers who might have the authority to claim authenticity. Instead, these claims were made mostly by coastal critics like Sepinwall, with *New York Times* critic Ginia Bellafante going so far as to call the

show “an exquisite bit of anthropology.”[20] The appeal of authenticity in Southern realist dramas is an appeal across difference and distance. Quality audiences, imagined as other to Southern audiences, like to be transported to a “real” South, but only through their television screens.

During its run from 2006 to 2011, *Friday Night Lights* was constructed by many critics as a show that's "not really about football." Even with that strategic repositioning by NBC and the show’s creatives, as Johnson argues, *Friday Night Lights* had difficulty appealing to either heartland or quality target audiences. She writes, “*Friday Night Lights* seemed so counterintuitive to prevailing mythologies of rural, working-class, flyover life as to force the network and television critics to actively agonize over their love for the show and to explicitly redeem their own cultural capital in the face of a heartland text with football as its milieu.”[21]

Johnson traces *Friday Night Lights*’ transition from its initial marketing alongside mass-appeal NFL football “to its re-valuation as a premium-appeal, subscriber-based, quality TV series by the fall of 2008,” as part of an argument about geographical myth, but I think the change also relates to the mode of representing religion throughout the series.[22] Despite its low ratings, it was a critical success and a surprisingly long-running series primarily because of its quality aesthetics and appeal.[23] Those quality aesthetics and the subsequent targeting of the quality audience established the representation of religion as available to realist genre television because it cultivated quality markers through difference in its representation of an authentic American South.

Intersectional “Authentic” Representations of Church as Southern Community

The churches in small-town Dillon are also sites for exploring the intersection of class, gender, and race within the Southern context. From the earliest episodes, viewers were cued to the centrality of the two town churches: one white and one black. Intercutting between the two

churches and their communities in the series' third episode, "Wind Sprints," scenes was designed to establish both churches as pivots around which the communities rotate. Such intercutting simultaneously visually explored their similarities and differences. The black church doesn't appear to have air conditioning; the white church does. The white church is a larger church, both in terms of building and congregation. But both churches share the function of community gathering and provide a nexus for the town's culture. Both feature preachers talking about Jesus and football in equal measure.

Although Dillon's churches continue to be places where characters network, flirt, seek strength, and so on, the clear connections and slight differences between the two raced congregations are rarely represented as starkly as in that early episode. This episode lays the representational groundwork for establishing Dillon as "authentically" Southern in its overtly and devoutly Christian culture as well as that culture's racial divide. Although not all main characters go to church—notably, Tyra Colette and her family of women positioned as outsiders to the dominant powers of the town do not attend—non-Christian and non-church-going characters are few and far between. Further, they are usually still positioned within a culture in which Christianity is dominant.

Although the church acts as a shaper of life in Dillon throughout the series run, it is not until the fourth season that the series delves into what it means to attend church beyond the community structuring and normalized behaviors. In the season four episode, "In the Skin of a Lion," Julie Taylor is preparing to leave for college and reveals to her mother that she probably won't go to church on her own. Church for her had become something she did with her family but not a representation of her own beliefs. As the episode progresses, her mother, Tami, discusses her fears and difficulty with reconciling Julie's changing beliefs. Eventually they

reach an agreement that Julie will continue to go to church with the family but that they will respect her religious choices. This is one of the many examples in *Friday Night Lights* in which the women of the series occupy the main religious space. They discuss religion, are the forces that bring their families to church, and struggle with the conflicts that arise from religious beliefs operating in a complicated lived existence. Moreover, Julie's act of going to church despite her loss of faith reinforces the representation of the authentic South as a place in which Christianity structures culture beyond belief and devotion.

At the other end of the spectrum of belief, the show also briefly represented born-again Christianity. In the second season of *Friday Night Lights*, Lyla Garrity (Minka Kelly) begins to express herself as a born-again Christian after the end of her relationship with injured quarterback Jason Street. Her evangelism is portrayed as both true for her—it gives her some stability and peace of mind at a time during which she is obviously unmoored—but it's also portrayed as another instance of Lyla orienting herself around a young man/romantic interest. First she was the head cheerleader to Jason's star quarterback, then she acts as devoted girlfriend and nursemaid to her now paraplegic boyfriend while also having an affair with Tim, his best friend. Throughout the first season, she often turns to her faith to try to find comfort, but in the first episode of the second season, she is baptized and born again after re-devoting herself to her Christianity over the summer.[24] This leads to her main second-season storyline centering around her work at a Christian radio station and her relationship with a radio host there who is also a member of her church, Chris. Like a few other storylines in season two—including Tyra and Landry accidentally killing Tyra's assaulter then hiding it—Lyla's renewed faith and her relationship with Chris were mostly ignored in subsequent seasons. She's still portrayed as

Christian and church-going, but not with the same fervor and extracurricular activities, and thus without a related ongoing storyline.

Lyla's disappearing evangelism is mostly the result of a storyline that didn't work narratively: creating a new space in the Christian radio station took Lyla out of the orbit of the other main characters and placed her in a mostly separate narrative space, with the only linkage her love triangle with Chris and Tim that wasn't even much of a triangle. But the radio station and Lyla's place there also necessitated a lot of diegetic discussion of a very particular approach to faith: a born-again, evangelical Protestant Christianity that can be off-putting for viewers not of that faith. It's culturally associated with televangelist preachers like Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, who by the mid-2000s had become mostly offensive, outdated figures who blamed natural disasters and terrorist acts on homosexuality and women's liberation. Despite its brief appearance, the turn toward a non-judgmental portrayal of being born-again and acknowledging the power that devout faith can have in people's lives is a characteristic of Southern realism that sets it apart from other realistic modes. The Southern realist mode can represent born-again Christianity because it is safely ensconced within the containment strategy of representing an authentic other: it is assumed that within a portrayal of the "real" South, there will be some born-again evangelical Christianity because it is part of the cultural myth of the American South. In *Friday Night Lights*, the Southern realist mode includes representations of Christian faith and practice by membership and attendance at church as the norm. Yet representations of non-belief and evangelism are included within this mode as well, as long as they remain in relation to the norm of Christian culture.

Friday Night Lights was often praised by both religious audiences and popular critics for its approach to Christianity that allowed the representation of religion to have weight, to be

considered a significant part of people's lived experiences, and as something that people talk about and rely on.[25] This approach manifested clearly in a few smaller character arcs over the course of the series. The most notorious was the measured approach to a story in the show's fourth season in which high school student, Becky, goes to Tami Taylor for guidance as she is considering an abortion. Tami responds to her question, "Do you think I'm going to hell if I had an abortion?" with a sensitive but definitive, "No, honey, I don't."[26] This storyline is informed by the Christian context in which Dillon is set, but it doesn't discuss religion's role in the decision for Becky more than that line (though the father's parents do use a turn to religion in their attempts to convince the teenagers to keep the baby). The contrast between Tami Taylor – a devout Christian woman who personally opposes abortion but sets aside her own moral choices in order to support a young woman who needs her guidance – and the similarly Christian parents of the father – who use their religion to justify pressuring Becky to keep the baby – nuance assumptions about the Southern Christian context. The representation beyond Southern stereotype—while also representing the stereotype—helps to enforce claims of authenticity while also enabling the assumed liberal quality audiences to identify with a main character, Tami. Within the writers' room for the show, as they worked through this storyline, David Hudgins revealed the need to claim authenticity when he told me, "Our mantra was: what would really happen in this situation? . . . [this led to] defaulting to me [as the lone Southerner in the room]."[27] In this case and others, Hudgins' Southern tokenism helped the production culture to write and claim authenticity of Southern culture regarding religion.

For five seasons, *Friday Night Lights* represented specifically Christian religion within the Southern realist context of a small-town community. Its characters prayed often and visibly enacted Christian culture, organized around both football and church. The show's mode of

representing Christianity is less abstracted than most of the case studies in this dissertation. Yet, when talking about the religious storyline, Hudgins used the term "spirituality" instead of Christianity or religion. Even as he explained that it was "true to Texas, true to the characters, and true to [his] experience" as the support for his claim that the representation of "spirituality" on *Friday Night Lights* was "authentic," the claim of authenticity was not enough to contain the risk of religion within the ideology of contemporary Hollywood television. Although I used the term religion in the question, Hudgins responded by using spirituality. Like most of the writers I spoke to, religion remains risky and to be avoided regardless of how complex and explicit religious representations appear on the shows they work on. His avoidance implies that the legacy practices used in response to the linking religion with non-quality designations like preachy and middlebrow, as ossified in the 1990s and perpetuated into the twenty-first century, continues to shape the ideology within the industry to a greater extent than the representation of religion on television indicates. Hudgins' hesitation in relation to *Friday Night Light's* textual representations of religion exemplifies the paradox my study is analyzing: religious representation as seen on television seems to have little bearing on the ongoing reticence of creatives who work in that realm to acknowledge religion. Better for them to abstract, displace, or deny religion than be potentially seen as religious or working on religious television.

AUTHENTIC ARTISTIC VISION, QUALITY CHANNEL: *RECTIFY*

Rectify was the first original dramatic series produced for SundanceTV. The channel started in 1996 as the Sundance Channel, a subscription-based premium channel that focused on art-house, international, and independent cinema, much like the film festival with which it shares its name.[28] Bought by AMC networks in 2008, the channel transitioned from subscription-based revenue to limited sponsorship and finally fully ad-supported in 2013, the same year that *Rectify*

premiered.[29] Alongside this transition to an ad-supported model, SundanceTV began moving toward more miniseries (e.g. *Carlos* [2010] and unscripted series (e.g. *Push Girls* [2012-2013]) before launching *Rectify* as its first original scripted series in 2013.[30] *Rectify* was originally developed for SundanceTV's sister channel, AMC, but as *The Walking Dead* shifted AMC's programming toward action, network executives thought it would be a better fit for the SundanceTV, with its history as a place for sometimes quieter indie fare.[31] Following *Rectify*, SundanceTV found critical success with the miniseries *The Honorable Woman* (2014) and produced new scripted series like *The Red Road* (2014-2015) and *Hap and Leonard* (2015-). *Rectify* also proved a model for series that fit with Sundance's indie history and brand: short, six-episode seasons, as a natural extension of Sundance's previous focus on film and continued miniseries programming. Save for *Rectify*'s second season, which had ten episodes, the six-episode season has been used for all of SundanceTV's original drama series. With *Rectify* as its programming anchor, SundanceTV marketers and programmers have branded the channel as a place where the independent spirit of the Sundance Film Festival still shapes what viewers can watch on the channel, only now it includes television series.

The show focuses on members of the Holden family in the small town of Paulie, Georgia (a fictional town created from locations outside of Atlanta) as they react to the release of Daniel Holden (Aden Young) from death row after nineteen years. Daniel entered jail a teenager and emerges a man, floundering for his place in a family that has changed drastically and a town that still largely considers him a murderer despite his exoneration. While in jail, his father died, his mother (J. Smith-Cameron) remarried, and she and her new husband had a son, a younger brother (Jake Austin Walker) whom Daniel had never known. In addition, Daniel's classmate, Teddy (Clayne Crawford), became his step-brother, which brought Teddy's devout wife, Tawney

(Adelaide Clemens), into this new family configuration as well. The story moves slowly, with few plot developments taking place in an individual episode. This structure allows the Southern small-town setting and the complex inner-workings of the main characters to occupy the majority of narrative focus. Within the show's focus on setting and psychology, a central narrative concern of the first season involves the push-and-pull of Christianity within this small Southern town. The show poses the possibility that religion can serve as a path for salvation.

For *Rectify's* producer, Melissa Bernstein, the religious elements on the show are displaced onto showrunner Ray McKinnon's artistic vision and his desire to represent an authentic South. When asked in an interview about the overt religion on display by the character of Tawney, as well as the first season's overall preoccupation with Christian-framed tenets of penance, redemption, and grace, she always deflected, displacing religion's presentation within McKinnon's authentic artistic vision. When I asked about the show's religious elements, she replied:

> I don't think that was Ray's goal from the outset to tell a particularly religious or spiritual story. I will say I think that one of his goals was to… you know he's a Southerner and I think that's the world he knows well and the characters he knows well, and I think he wanted to authentically put those stories out there. I think Ray wouldn't even say that; I think he'd just say I just wanted to tell a story about real people, about flawed people, about people who are out there. I think he is very interested in man's search for meaning, that is the place that he comes from. So I think it's less about God, or faith, or religion and more about meaning and how do we fit into this crazy universe, how do we make sense of our lives, and how do we choose who we're going to be.[32]

Within the span of her answer, Bernstein moved from acknowledging religion as part of Southern culture to saying the story is not even religious, and ultimately she abstracted the show's religious representation to a basic existential questions with no sense of religiosity. Meanwhile, she used Ray McKinnon's authorial goal to authentically tell stories about the South to help distance her from any role within the production of religious representation.

It is worth underscoring that the appeal to authenticity recurred again and again when I spoke with writers on any post-network era show featuring religion – not just those operating in the Southern realism milieu. Authenticity is the watchword for modern television and the desire for artistic integrity within the commercial form. Nonetheless, the pursuit of authenticity is especially sought after in contemporary Southern realist programs. For *Rectify* in particular and Southern realist shows more generally (like *Justified* or *True Detective*), the notion of authenticity and its attendant containment of Christian representation and themes, has become a part of the way these shows are marketed and sold to quality viewers. Authenticity is a mode of appeal to the quality audience that is even more pronounced in *Rectify* than in *Friday Night Lights* due to the shows' different distribution outlets and later timeslot. The leeway granted to *Rectify* due to its presence on a quality niche-oriented cable channel contrasts with *Friday Night Lights'* need for broadcast appeal early in its run.

Despite these differences, for both of these Southern realist dramas, the place of religion becomes not just a distinguishing element of the story but one that is discussed as such in many reviews. This prominence in the critical reception eventually shaped the marketing of the shows, if only via certain proscribed means. According to the Senior Vice President of Marketing for Sundance TV, Monica Bloom, the network's marketers have not focused their publicity on the religious elements of *Rectify*; however, when reviews or online writing about the show highlight

those features, marketers do like to link, retweet, or post those outside sources to their official social media and the show's website.[33] Thus, while foregrounding religion may not be an objective of their internal publicity strategy, SundanceTV's marketing department recognizes the sales potential of this thread of discourse about the show. As such, they have fostered the conversation about the representation of religion as a way to make noise, or at least boost the signal, of the show's distinct characteristics within an ever-more competitive and cluttered field of quality cable dramas.

SundanceTV: Indie Brand, Quality Audience

SundanceTV built their cable channel brand and initial programming strategy on movies that fit the indie appeal of the eponymous film festival. Only in 2013 did they move into airing original television series in the same year SundanceTV became ad-supported, as discussed above. This move to original series was due to the availability of *Rectify* through the corporate AMC Networks family, the changing media landscape that valued quality television series to establish cable brand, and the rising price of being carried by cable systems.[34] The basic cable channel's idea of a quality audience is acknowledged to be about taste foremost and demographics later. Monica Bloom described *Rectify* as "the first Sundance [original dramatic] series" and addressed how that novelty affected the company's approach to marketing and its identification of their target audience:

> Typically, as we're developing a marketing plan we start with kind of an internal discussion, identifying key attributes of the program itself, what we feel might have some appeal to our audience. We create a positioning statement [from that]. Sometimes we will go into market research in order to test ideas. We did so specifically around the launch of season one of *Rectify* since it was our first scripted drama. We wanted to get a sense of

> the people who were familiar with Sundance and would this appeal to them as well as to the people who are not familiar with Sundance's brand of storytelling. . . . Part of the reason we [engaged the showrunner Ray McKinnon in this process] is the way that SundanceTV approaches the creation of our programming. We really want to give voice to the creative out there who may not be broadcast-ready. We—much like the heritage of Sundance Institute and the Sundance Film Festival—we're looking for those new and upcoming voices who aren't necessarily heard in other areas [of television], and we give them a chance. We really want to make sure their vision is seen in an accurate, holistic way.[35]

In this description of her department's work in marketing, Bloom highlighted the significant differences between her work at that small cable channel with a very specific brand identity and the marketing goals of the broadcast networks. She added, "From what I understand of the broadcast networks, they will dictate what direction [the show] will go from a messaging standpoint and the creators don't necessarily have a lot of input."[36]

The direct contrast drawn to the broadcast networks here becomes a way of cultivating cultural capital and identifying SundanceTV's quality audience in contrast to the presumably less discerning broadcast audience. The difference between marketing for a smaller cable channel versus a much more mass-oriented broadcast channel is twofold, according to Bloom: not only is it about targeting a more discerning audience but also about greater input from creatives. Broadcast marketers don't have the same amount of time to confer with the creatives behind their shows, according to Bloom. The comparison Bloom implied is not unlike a boutique store discussing how personalized their products and customer service can be in contrast to what big box stores can do. This is not a slight on either the broadcast or niche model, but rather a way to

indicate how they differentiate themselves in a market that still seems dominated by a mass mentality. SundanceTV builds its niche quality brand by ensuring that so-called authentic artistic voices of the channel's showrunners are heard and incorporated during the entire creative process, from development to marketing. This emphasis on an auteurist mode of production helps to build the channel's quality brand and resulting target audience.

SundanceTV's quality brand and audience targeting were further explained in my conversation with Senior Vice President of Scripted Programming at SundanceTV, Christian Vesper. He described the channel's transition from pay-cable service and film-based outlet to one focused on television dramas that appealed to their still-boutique audience. He told me:

> I've been here [at Sundance] long enough that I started here when we were almost entirely a movie-based service. This was a familiar model for a long time in the paid television universe: Commercial free and basically considered sort of a mini-premium [channel]. As marketplace competition increased and platform diversity and platform proliferation [grew], the value of just having movies diminished. You know we had great movies. We really focused on—unlike the other networks—art films and European cinema or Asian cinema. The notion was that we were bringing the festival experience to television. Before streaming and Netflix that was really a service of sorts. We weren't rated [by Nielsen] for most of our history so I have no sense of how many people were watching, but we have a sense that we were reaching a niche audience who cared about film. That said, you look for ways to distinguish yourself that work. Movies still play a role at the channel but they tend to be higher profile [than earlier art house fare] because we are currently rated and ad-supported.[37]

For both the marketing and programming executives I interviewed, the history of SundanceTV's appeal to a niche taste culture remains the strongest element of the brand, past and present. This philosophy carries over into their original television dramas beginning with *Rectify* and carrying through *Hap and Leonard* (2016-), its most recent series. Without saying so explicitly, Vesper acknowledged the commercial necessity involved in creating quality programming arising out of a premium channel identity and the imperative of adapting to an ad-supported system. Difference and distinction in terms of channel brand and programming must be amplified while also being high-profile enough to appeal to a wider quality audience than perhaps those looking for a Kurosawa film on cable.

Basing notions of quality on the assumed upscale tastes of its target audience is fairly prevalent among marketers and executives for niche outlets that require subscription fees for their viewers—either through cable or streaming platforms. The taste-based notion of quality is especially notable in the latter and will be a focus of the final chapter. But it is worth addressing here regarding Southern realism and notions of television quality more generally. The demarcation of certain taste cultures (e.g., people who like indie movies) as markers of the quality audience serves as a way of adding a qualitative sense of value for programming that often lacks successful quantitative audience ratings. Part of the determination of quality in the post-network era is that it is rarified. It produces a specific and small in-group of those who have the cultural, and often literal, capital to appreciate them. For *Rectify*, part of that quality appeal rested in its slow, meditative narrative pacing and its approach to religious representation within the Southern realist mode.

The Slow Southern Religion of *Rectify*

Rectify is often described as a slow drama in that its focus is on the internal and interpersonal psychology of its characters while the plot is secondary and elliptical.[38] Although many critics of the show find the characters and their development to be more important to the narrative than the show's premise, its premise does shape the narrative in key ways.[39] *Rectify* is not merely a slice of Southern life narrative. It is also a crime drama. As noted above, the show begins with the release of Daniel Holden from death row, where he had resided for almost two decades after he was convicted of murder at the age of 17. This establishes Daniel's character as a man out of touch with his world. He re-enters his small town life with a changed family makeup and to a largely alien social and technological world. While he was in prison, Daniel's father died, and his mother remarried, so Daniel must live with his new stepfather and be in the same family with his stepbrother, Teddy, who had moved into the primary filial role when Daniel was in jail. Daniel and Teddy knew each other in high school and did not get along, nor do they connect once Teddy is forced to adjust to being one of two grown sons in the family. The tension between the two remains high as Teddy rails against both the mutual interest and connection Daniel and Teddy's wife, Tawney, have shown for each other, especially in the first season, and the social problems Teddy believes he encounters by being part of a freed murderer's family life. Teddy continues to believe that Daniel is guilty of the murder for which he was convicted, despite new DNA evidence implicating Daniel's innocence and setting him free. Daniel's closest ties to the outside world, both in prison and once he reenters life outside, are his mother, Janet, and his sister, Amantha (Abigail Spencer), who has worked tirelessly all of her adult life to get him released. Amantha even moved back to Paulie, Georgia, their hometown, from Atlanta to help him adjust. Both women maintain he is innocent and are highly supportive of him.

The family dynamic is certainly central to the show, but concurrent with that is the continuing pursuit of the truth as to what happened during the crime for which Daniel was convicted. This is actually a fairly basic crime mystery, familiar to television viewers through episodic procedurals. However, in *Rectify,* this mystery is stretched over multiple episodes and presented only in glimpses of what happened and who was involved. The prosecutors and law enforcement who convicted Daniel in the first place pursue the case so as to amass enough evidence to convict Daniel again. The second season ends with Daniel being confronted with enough evidence—circumstantial and biased though it may be—to convince him to sign a confession. The criminal justice plot is the *sub rosa* driving force of the series, creating the conditions in which the exploration of the characters' personal and interpersonal development and relationships can develop. It operates similar to the football in *Friday Night Lights* in that it is the narrative glue for the characters, providing the context and foundation for ongoing narrative arcs and conflicts.

Rectify is filmed and located in a small town in Georgia, and it very specifically situated in a Southern milieu. There is a spectrum of character ideologies on display in the show, but they all exist within an imagined Southern mentality in which Christianity, conservatism, and whiteness are the dominant characteristics. All the characters are reacting to or within this paradigm. Tawney is a true believer in Christianity; it guides her and uplifts her and provides her with a support system that her family does not. Through her Christianity, she connects with Daniel in a way that supersedes her relationship with her husband. As a victim of the system, Daniel is both insider and outsider of the hegemony of their culture, similar to Tawney who, within the context of the show, is in a similar position regarding the approach to Christianity. Tawney truly believes and applies Christian principles of love and forgiveness to her personal

reactions and relationships, but based on Teddy's occasional reactions to her credulity and the reactions of other supposed church-goers we see in the series, she is unique in that. Tawney's devotion is not portrayed as naïve or negative, but it does seem distinct from a general sense of hypocrisy attached to superficial Christian culture, especially as it is embodied by her husband, Teddy.

Other than Tawney, the dominant expression of Christian belief in *Rectify* is cultural—and often superficial. Teddy, in particular, represents a kind of cultural Christianity that functions for people like Teddy to use as a justification to judge others from that perspective. In the first season, Teddy is especially cruel to Daniel. He takes pains to assert that he has taken Daniel's place as an adult son to Daniel's mother, and goes so far as to ask questions about how Daniel was abused in prison as a way to reassert his own proper (married) masculinity and to make Daniel feel lesser. Teddy justifies his treatment of Daniel as part of his role as family protector, judging Daniel to be guilty even though the legal system has rescinded that judgment. Teddy judges from a place of supposed moral authority, one closely tied to his position as supposed ideal Southern masculinity. Teddy drives a new truck, lives in a nice house, dresses well, attends church (even if he does it mostly for appearances) and is able to provide for his wife to stay at home and tend to the house. It's a deeply conservative and capitalistic social construction within which religion is merely a marker of fitting in. The show conveys the notion that to be too devout, like Tawney, is to be different and to be areligious, like Amantha, is to be different as well. For those living within this white Southern middle-class hegemony, to be different is to be unsuccessful. Part of representing an authentic South involves representing hypocritical and flawed Christians like Teddy. In *Rectify* the slow drama of character development occurs around a variety of touchstones, including religion and the array of its manifestations in an authentic

vision of the South. Similar to *Friday Night Lights*, *Rectify* presents a spectrum of belief contained within a Christian culture, as spectrum that can contribute to claims of authenticity through its diversity even within a Southern culture imagined as dominantly Christian.

Tawney's devotion to Christian ideals informs not only her response to Daniel and her empathy toward him but also Daniel's pursuit of stability. In Daniel's mind, Tawney is his rock and his redeemer. She is the only one in the family who didn't know him before his imprisonment and is therefore the only one not constantly comparing him to his earlier self. She sees Daniel for the new, damaged person he is after spending more than half of his life on death row. She is also the object of Daniel's romantic attention because she treats him as a human individual, not a shadow of his teenaged self. Moreover, through her support, Daniel begins to find some spiritual peace through Tawney's religiousness. In the fifth and penultimate episode of the first season, "Drip, Drip," Daniel's most peaceful moment occurs after he joins a congregation community outreach tent to be baptized. He enters the rows of people in white outfits after a night of wandering and struggling with his unstable emotions, seemingly seeking rebirth. As he is baptized, Tawney appears in the tent, and when their eyes meet, it's clear that Daniel needs her connection to Christianity to stabilize his own religious efforts. He resists going under the water until he meets her gaze across the tent; she cries as he is baptized. He then meets her and they share a long hug. Their relationship is strengthened by their now shared faith, and Daniel's apparently improved mental state.

However, as Tawney pulls away to distance herself not only from Daniel's violent tendencies and instability but also from her potential romantic relationship with him, Daniel's faith seems to disappear. We don't see him again attending church, nor do we see him as peaceful as he was post-Baptism again for the rest of the first season and into the second season. In the

second season, it becomes clear why religion disappeared from his life when Tawney did: for him, Tawney was his faith. He tells her that she was his salvation in the episode “The Great Destroyer,” using Christian faith language and admitting to his conflation of Christian salvation and human salvation through his love of Tawney.

As Tawney moves out of Daniel's storylines in season two, religion, in the form of Christianity, became a more marginal part of the show’s narrative. Although there are hints of broader spiritual and mythological symbols and stories, religion as part of the show's Southern realism and representative authenticity disappears. Instead, there appears a continued yearning for salvation by Daniel: through Tawney herself, through escape to Atlanta at one point, and through notable scenes in a pecan tree grove that Daniel's father used to take him to as a child. In the first episode of the second season, “Running with the Bull,” Daniel dreams as he is in a coma in the hospital after being beaten by the brother and friends of the girl Daniel was accused of killing. In the grove, he encounters both a man who seems to represent divine temptation—Devil or otherwise— a decrepit statue of a satyr that Daniel focuses on, and the spirit of (or representation of) Daniel's one friend from death row, Kerwin. This friend is a young man convicted and imprisoned similar to Daniel, but is not depicted as an overtly bad man. Kerwin was not granted a reprieve and thus was executed, but he appears to Daniel as a guiding, possibly divine, force to coax him back to wakefulness and life. Even as religion itself takes a backseat to other stories in *Rectify's* second season, the show maintains the foundation of metaphysical seeking developed earlier. In addition, the fleeting sense of peace Daniel finds after his baptism indicates the inability of Christianity to fully provide the framework for processing and rectifying the complicated human systems and relationships required of these characters in this story. Christianity is one avenue, Tawney's main avenue, for comfort and meaning, as well as the

culturally assumed and proscribed avenue for dealing with such family and community trauma as having a family member returned from death row. But it is clearly not a fulfilling one for any of the characters. Tawney represents the devout Christian end of the spectrum of belief presented within the Southern realist mode, and, as noted above, Amantha represents the non-religious polar opposite. But both are reactive to the centrality of Christianity.

Like in *Friday Night Lights*, representing a spectrum of Christian belief within a Southern culture structured around Christianity acts as a way that religion can be contained within quality television demarcations. Christianity and religious belief in *Rectify* becomes one of the many ways in which to present the psychologies of characters within a meditative mode of Southern realist drama. Here it is worth returning to executive producer Melissa Bernstein's explanation of religion's place within the production culture and marketing of *Rectify.* She reveals that despite the use of religion in *Rectify*, there remain clear incentives to distance creatives (and for creatives to distance themselves) from religion as a term and concept. She characterized *Rectify*'s use of religion as happenstance to representing "real people" in the American South, "real" as Ray McKinnon's authorial vision dictates. Moreover, the SVP of Marketing at SundanceTV made clear that the marketing of the show includes McKinnon's perspective. Thus, its lack of an overt display of religion—aside from in Sundance TV's Publicity social media feeds reposting and retweeting praise from viewers—supports Bernstein's claim that McKinnon would avoid highlighting the religious aspects. In an interview with *The Christian Post*, McKinnon avoided talking about religion, taking a question about redemption and answering it regarding forgiveness in a relationship.[40] Even within the containment provided by quality aesthetics, audience targeting, and channel brand, religion requires minimizing within its production culture even when it is geographically displaced the American South.

Highlighting Otherness Through Baptism in Southern Realism

Inasmuch as representing Christianity is a defining characteristic of Southern realism, so is the fact that Southern realist dramas often devote entire storylines to the expression of that via artistic visual representation of baptism. Lyla on *Friday Night Lights* and Daniel on *Rectify* both participate in this rite in an effort to find peace. Being baptized does appear to work and provide such peace, even if its duration is fairly minimal. The act of baptism and the portrayal of it have long been a part of fiction set in the South and characterized as Southern. From Flannery O'Connor's gothic stories like "The River" to The Depression-set reimagining of *The Odyssey* in *O, Brother, Where Art Thou?* (Joel Coen, 2000), the image of local adherents dressed in white, moving as a community to the nearby river, creek, or revival tent is a literary and visual referent to the American South that both *Rectify* and *Friday Night Lights* engage with, if only briefly, in their series' run.

In his analysis of baptism in Southern cinema, Bradley Shaw describes such a scene from *Sling Blade* (Thornton, 1996), "Significantly, Thornton abandons the Gothic horror film images to present the baptism itself with a simple lyrical beauty."[41] And of *The Apostle* (Duval, 1997), he says, "At the same time that Sonny's heretical baptism is offered as a critique of Southern evangelical Protestantism's individualistic blind-spots, it also serves as a visual remix [and] seems to suggest there is some efficacy in this religious ritual."[42] Both of these films are indie, aligning them with the Southern realist use of that mode on television. The pervasive presence of Southern Christianity and the use of baptism as a recurrent trope in Southern dramas invoke the cultural imaginary of the South. As Shaw points out, baptisms are not clean symbols within this imaginary, for they often represent ambivalences and complexities of individuals existing within

a culture of Christian hegemony. The ritual and the religious culture it represents has real impact on the characters, and that is represented through visual representations of baptism that render it poetic and somewhat beyond the regular field of representation. They are also often very white in their portrayal of baptism despite the connection between black Americans and Baptist churches.

The images of baptism on television are also presented as other by both their sacredness and their Southernness in relation to the assumed secular, coastal quality audience. Adult baptism, as a way of becoming born-again as a Christian re-affirms a person's faith in Jesus Christ as their personal savior, is not an image represented often in popular fiction outside of presentations of the South.[43] Due to the scarcity of this representation, it remains both other and special, something that, from an industry standpoint, could distinguish a show. Further, from an artistic standpoint such a representation could signal a special sacred space, given transcendental weight within the story due to its unfamiliarity. When Daniel in *Rectify* encounters the baptismal procession, he appears transported to another world, in awe of these unfamiliar people and their strange peace. Baptism becomes a moment of unfamiliarity for both character and audience, serving as a means of highlighting the Southern otherness of the show via creative aesthetic decisions that contain Christianity within markers of quality.

For both Lyla and Daniel, baptism is a peace that does not last. Their brief time as born-again Christians—at least the brief time they are characterized as such in a straightforward manner—is mostly a temporary escape from their troubles. This characterization of Lyla and Daniel's devotion to Christianity seems borne out through the relative narrative brevity during which that character arc registers for them. Lyla's religiousness sinks back into the background, little mentioned and seemingly mostly forgotten following the second season when it took up most of her life and time outside of school.[44] Daniel's baptism, meanwhile, doesn't leave him

with close ties to the church community that he found in his brief submergence The fact that it strengthens his tie with Tawney is mitigated by her drawing away from him at the end of the first season and throughout the second season. Without Lyla's Christian radio boyfriend and without Tawney's influence on Daniel, both characters' baptism and focus on Christianity as a practice, guide, and frame for their lives fades. It is important that it was there, that it lasted for more than a few episodes and gained such focus and narrative weight in the series, but it was still generally an aberration in the larger contemporary television landscape.

Portraying that kind of religiosity is difficult on television, even for quality shows that locate religion as one of their main ways of representing an authentic vision of American Southern life. Yet, within an industry environment in which edge and controversy are constantly pronounced by creatives and marketers and underscored by scholars as a way to distinguish shows from middlebrow tastes and morals, the complicated representation of religion illustrated by the representation of baptism remains separate and not really discussed. The baptismal born-again devotion is outside of most writers' knowledge and experience. Moreover, that level of Christian devotion is culturally overshadowed by evangelical conservatives that it is difficult to write from that perspective in a real, extended, and still dramatic way. Again, the fear of being preachy looms large over the creatives and executives working on these shows. What's more, the long reach of the 1990s shows discussed in chapter one lays a surprising burden of representation on these more recent portrayals. The creatives on *Friday Night Lights* and *Rectify* were attempting to move beyond the normalized and neutered cultural idea of Christianity that has lost some of its dogmatic heft and highlight the specifically and explicitly religious Christian culture. Yet such a move is perceived as risky and potentially alienating for the quality audience they are trying to reach. As shown in the analysis of *Friday Night Lights* and *Rectify* in this chapter, even

within the containment of that risk afforded by quality representation of an authentic South, there are substantial limits to religious representation.

CONCLUSION

Both *Friday Night Lights* and *Rectify* depict Christianity as a dominant part of Southern culture, enabling a broad and occasionally deep exploration of religion within the storyworld of their shows. Christianity is a key component of the "real" American South, a heartland value and subject that must be included if a show is to claim it is representing the authentic South. The representation of an authentic South is the guiding principle of Southern realism as an aesthetic mode that targets quality audiences. Southern realism evolved from the Southern gothic mode, maintaining the latter's Southern representational foci on race, class, and religion but translating horrific excess into realist understatement that could be branded as quality. Within Southern realism, religion, specifically Christianity, is of central concern. Thus, Southern realist shows, exemplified by *Friday Night Lights* and *Rectify* but also visible in such shows as *Justified* and *True Detective*, represent Christianity as a dominant cultural structure that shapes the full spectrum of belief represented. From evangelists to atheists, the characters in Southern realist dramas are influenced by the cultural norm of Christianity.

Creatives and executives, outside of that culture, can claim to represent the authentic South of Southern realism, targeting viewers who are also outside of that culture. Southern realist dramas are not perceived as preachy like predecessors *Touched by an Angel* and *7th Heaven* were; they're *real*. Portrayals of baptisms embody the realist approach, for example. Dramatic television baptisms present the sacredness of the ritual as a powerful and indie-influenced aesthetic but then show that the ritual does not deliver salvation in the real world of the characters' everyday lives. Unlike the middlebrow religious dramas discussed in chapter one, the

writers, producers, executives, and marketers who create "real" Southern stories such as *Friday Night Lights* and *Rectify* – and position them within the quality brand – use the artistic claims of authenticity to protect themselves from the risk of being seen as religious or preachy themselves. The combination of regional realness and otherness enables religion to be displaced and thus distanced from the Hollywood hesitation regarding religion.

Southern realist dramas illustrate a paradox of post-network era religious representation. Like the other categories of dramas in this study, they are part of a boom in the number and type of religious subjects in non-religious, mainstream television. But within the industry, there is little corresponding promotion of the presence of religion on television. In fact, from 2003-2015 we saw the opposite dominate: a variety of strategies are employed by industry practitioners to disavow, minimize, abstract, and displace religion. These strategies of containment take place within the context of writers' rooms and executive offices and function to make religion ideologically safe to work with in the television industry. As part of those containment strategies for religion, creatives must deal with the legacy of religion as middlebrow and preachy. The displacement and distance displayed in discussions with writers, producers, executives, and marketers for the shows in this chapter, *Friday Night Lights* and *Rectify*, illustrate the disconnect between what we see on screen in terms of religion and how creatives discuss their work and their understanding of it with regard to religious representation. For the dramas addressed in this chapter, authenticity and Southern realism are the containment strategies employed. In the next chapter, some of the same makers of quality television that mark the Southern realist dramas are used slightly differently in a fantastic genre to contain religion not on a geographical region but instead in the unreality of the fantastic.

[1] Charles Mcgrath, "The Triumph of the Prime-Time Novel," *The New York Times*, October 22, 1995, sec. Magazine, http://www.nytimes.com/1995/10/22/magazine/the-prime-time-novel-the-triumph-of-the-prime-time-novel.html.
[2] Although my use of the term draws on histories of realism in literature and media, and has sometimes been used to refer to mid- to late-nineteenth realist novels from Southern writers like Kate Chopin, it is not as a compound term often used, and not with as specific a meaning as I give it here.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Bradley Shaw, "Baptizing Boo: Religion in the Cinematic Southern Gothic," *Mississippi Quarterly* 63, no. 3/4 (2010): 448.
[5] Ibid., 458.
[6] Michael Z. Newman, *Indie: An American Film Culture.* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 2.
[7] Ibid., 226.
[8] Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Authentic TM: The Politics and Ambivalence in a Brand Culture* (New York: NYU Press, 2012), 10.
[9] Michael Z. Newman and Elana Levine, *Legitimating Television* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 18.
[10] David Hudgins, telephone interview, September 11, 2015.
[11] Andrew J. Bottomley, "Quality TV and the Branding of U.S. Network Television: Marketing and Promoting *Friday Night Lights*," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 32, no. 5 (July 4, 2015): 482–97; Matthew Zoller Seitz, "Sundance's Rectify, Perhaps the Most Quiet Drama on TV, Is Truly Christian Art," *Vulture*, June 19, 2014, http://www.vulture.com/2014/06/tv-review-rectify-season-2.html?mid=facebook_vulture; Mary McNamara, "Review: 'Rectify' Is a Revelation That Sets a New Standard," *Los Angeles Times*, April 22, 2013, http://articles.latimes.com/2013/apr/22/entertainment/la-et-st-rectify-20130422; Mike Hale, "'Rectify' on the Sundance Channel," *The New York Times*, April 21, 2013, sec. Arts / Television, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/22/arts/television/rectify-on-the-sundance-channel.html.
[12] Victoria E. Johnson, "The Persistence of Geographic Myth in a Convergent Media Era," *Journal of Popular Film & Television* 38, no. 2 (June 2010): 59.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Victoria E. Johnson, *Heartland TV: Prime Time Television and the Struggle for U.S. Identity* (NYU Press, 2008), 22.
[15] Bottomley; Johnson, "Geographic Myth;" Hudgins interview; Sarah Hughes, "Why Friday Night Lights Is One of the Best US Shows of Recent Years," *The Guardian*, February 13, 2012, sec. Television & radio, http://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/tvandradioblog/2012/feb/13/friday-night-lights.
[16] Victoria E. Johnson, "Geographic Myth," 60.
[17] For more on NBC's marketing of *Friday Night Lights* as quality, see: Andrew J. Bottomley, "Quality TV and the Branding of U.S. Network Television: Marketing and Promoting *Friday Night Lights*," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 32, no. 5 (July 4, 2015): 482–97, doi:10.1080/10509208.2015.1031624.
[18] David Hudgins, telephone interview, September 11, 2015.
[19] Alan Sepinwall, *The Revolution Was Televised* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012), 277-78.

[20] Sepinwall, *The Revolution Was Televised*; Nancy Franklin, "The Heart of Texas," *The New Yorker*, October 8, 2007, http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2007/10/08/the-heart-of-texas; Ginia Bellafante, "A 'Friday Night Lights' Farewell," *ArtsBeat*, July 16, 2011, http://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/07/16/a-friday-night-lights-farewell/; James Poniewozik, "*Friday Night Lights* Watch (Repost): Let's Go Home," *Time*, July 16, 2011, http://entertainment.time.com/2011/07/16/friday-night-lights-watch-repost-lets-go-home/.
[21] Victoria E. Johnson, "The Persistence of Geographic Myth in a Convergent Media Era," Journal of Popular Film & Television 38, no. 2 (June 2010), 62.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Ibid., 63.
[24] "Last Days of Summer," *Friday Night Lights*, *season 2*.
[25] Bellafante; Poniewozik; Rebeccca Cusey, "Friday Night Gets Religion," *National Review Online*, October 5, 2007, http://www.nationalreview.com/article/222408/friday-night-gets-religion-rebecca-cusey; Brett McCracken, "Saying Farewell to the Best Show on TV," *RELEVANT Magazine*, July 14, 2011, http://www.relevantmagazine.com/culture/tv/features/26184-saying-farewell-to-the-best-show-on-tv.
[26] "I Can't," *Friday Night Lights season 4*.
[27] Hudgins interview.
[28] Christian Vesper, telephone interview, October 31, 2014.
[29] Sam Thielman, "This Fall the Sundance Channel Will Begin Airing Ads," *Adweek*, March 24, 2013, http://www.adweek.com/news/television/sundance-channel-goes-ad-supported-148128.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Melissa Bernstein, telephone interview, September 22, 2014
[32]Ibid.
[33] Monica Bloom, telephon interview, October 17, 2014.
[34] Vesper interview.
[35] Monica Bloom, telephone interview, October 17, 2014.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Vesper interview.
[38] Sundi Rose-Holt, "More than One Kind of Silence in 'Rectify,'" *EW.com*, August 7, 2014, http://community.ew.com/2014/08/07/more-than-one-kind-of-silence-in-rectify/; Matthew Zoller Seitz, "Sundance's *Rectify*, Perhaps the Most Quiet Drama on TV, Is Truly Christian Art," *Vulture*, June 19, 2014, http://www.vulture.com/2014/06/tv-review-rectify-season-2.html?mid=facebook_vulture; Mike Hale, "'Rectify' on the Sundance Channel," *The New York Times*, April 21, 2013, sec. Arts / Television, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/22/arts/television/rectify-on-the-sundance-channel.html.
[39] Seitz "Sundance's *Rectify*;" Mary McNamara, "Review: 'Rectify' Is a Revelation That Sets a New Standard," *Los Angeles Times*, April 22, 2013, http://articles.latimes.com/2013/apr/22/entertainment/la-et-st-rectify-20130422.
[40] Emma Koonse, "'Rectify' Series Creator Ray McKinnon Talks Television, Redemption, and the Future for Daniel Holden," *The Christian Post*, July 10, 2014, http://www.christianpost.com/news/rectify-series-creator-ray-mckinnon-talks-television-redemption-and-the-future-for-daniel-holden-123104/.

[41] Bradley Shaw, "Baptizing Boo: Religion in the Cinematic Southern Gothic," *Mississippi Quarterly* 63, no. 3/4 (2010): 465-66.
[42] Ibid., 473.
[43] The rise of black representation on television and black churchgoing is starting to change that through shows like *Empire* (Fox, 2014-).
[44] The dropping of this storyline was part of a series of narrative recalibrations on FNL in the third season which led to a few dropped storylines including one in which Tyra and Landry accidentally kill a man.

Chapter Three Abstracting and Displacing Religion in Quality Fantastic Dramas

QUALITY AUDIENCES AND THEIR FANTASTIC GENRE EXPECTATIONS

During the post-network era, there has been a steady growth in the number of religious dramas that can be categorized in the fantastic genres: fantasy (e.g., *Lost* [ABC, 2004-2011], *Dominion* [Syfy, 2014-2015], *Constantine* [NBC, 2014-2015], *The Leftovers* [HBO, 2014-]), science fiction (e.g., *Battlestar Galactica* [Sci Fi, 2003-2009]), and horror (e.g., *Supernatural* [WB/CW, 2005-], *Preacher* [AMC, 2016-]), or their combinations (e.g., *Sleepy Hollow* [Fox, 2013-], *Lucifer* [Fox, 2016-]). By definition, the characters and events in shows of the fantastic genres are not bound to conform to realistic conventions, and therefore, the shows within the fantastic genres have a wider array of representational possibilities than realist dramas, especially as each represents religion. Representing controversial topics, in particular, is made safe through the unreality of the fantastic. This is the case because audiences can more easily dismiss these representations as fantasy or unreal instead of coming to terms with their implications to their lived experiences.[1] Importantly, fantastic dramas also appeal to another segment of upscale audiences in addition to the quality target audience discussed in the prior chapter: fan audiences. Scholar Matt Hills posits that fans, such as those pursued by fantastic series, "are no longer an elite fraction of a coalition audience, but instead make up the entirety of a niche audience" with cultural power.[2] Fan audiences, like the quality audiences discussed in the previous chapter, are powerful target audiences pursued by industry marketers. They may overlap with the presumed quality audience, as they do for the shows discussed in this chapter, but fans are constructed with different taste profiles outside of the presumptive quality designation associated with realism.

Despite these differences, both audiences are presumed by marketers, executives, and creators to be oppositional to middlebrow religious representation.

Within quality fantastic series, quality and genre interact, particularly as the former works to legitimate the latter's low status. This chapter will focus on fantastic dramas that have gained distinction as quality dramas, demonstrating some of the strategies of containment from the previous chapter's realist dramas while also analyzing how creatives' discussions of religious representation change when they can use fantastic displacement as a distancing strategy. Subsequent chapters will examine dramas within the fantastic genres that have not garnered the quality label, requiring different strategies for distancing creatives from religion (including outright denial). The quality designation for the shows in this chapter allows for more acknowledgement of religion-as-religion—an acknowledgement familiar to the realist quality dramas of chapter two—while also using fantastic generic conventions of unreality to abstract religion to the point of spirituality. For creatives' discourse about their work, spirituality avoids the connotations with 1990s middlebrow religious representations while also not requiring complete denial their work's metaphysical concerns and religious influences (the latter being the pattern for the non-quality fantastic dramas in chapters four and five).

FANTASTIC GENRES AND SPIRITUALITY

Fantastic genres have long histories of approaching the profound questions of culture and humanity through a displaced representational reality. This displacement, in turn, enables a suspension of disbelief in audiences.[3] Religion's entrance into the representational field of fantastic genres during the 2003-2016 religious programming boom spurred particular industrial responses. More specifically, the presence of religious content provoked the legacy of enacting strategies of containment on the part of creatives. In their discussions with me about their work

on these quality fantastic dramas, creatives referred to what I perceived as religious representation as "spirituality," distancing themselves from the ideological risk of religion without losing the ability to use it in their work.

Fantastic genres represent reality through displacement; they facilitate the abstraction of religion into spirituality. As Heather Hendershot notes in her study of abortion and religion on *Battlestar Galactica*, as a science fiction show, "*Galactica* consistently grapples with religious issues and allows for the possibility that God (or gods) exist . . . [Uniquely, it] is able to break free of the dominant TV formula . . . whereby religious sentiment is inevitably associated with conservative values."[4] In stories that pit monotheism against polytheism or good against evil in a post-Christian framework, creatives can use vocabularies that appear spiritual, not religious, with greater alacrity.

Among creatives working in the quality fantastic mode, religious representation occupies the space of spirituality. Outside of the quality mode, creatives on fantastic series discuss religion as mythology, which they use as a literary, areligious term. Spirituality can be seen as the discursive middle-ground between religion and mythology.[5] Whereas religion is still associated by creatives with middlebrow tastes and preachy approaches to morality and divinity, mythology, as it is conceived by creatives, employs a literary technique in which some of the characters and stories may be gods or divine without the religious function attached to them. Spirituality, in contrast, is an abstraction of religion. Framing content as spiritual, then, provides a way for industry practitioners to contain risks associated with religion without fully giving up a traditionally religious function for their characters: seeking profound or metaphysical meaning. While the next two chapters in this project analyze the tendency in the fantastic genres toward mythology, in this chapter, the focus is specifically on quality fantastic genres and their

abstraction of religion in the form of spirituality. In particular, I look at how, in such series, a turn toward spirituality in the creatives' discourse about their use of religion facilitates in-depth religious representation of both tropes and religion's traditional social functions. The overt representation of religious tropes remains central to all the fantastic dramas studied herein. However, for the shows in this chapter, the addition of quality markers allows for the representation of religion's impact on characters' lived experiences, similar to the quality realist dramas of the previous chapter. For *Battlestar Galactica, Lost,* and *The Leftovers,* the combination of genre and quality allow for religious representation and creatives' discussions of it to thrive without employing the middlebrow content and audience associations that the term religion acquired in the 1990s within the prime-time television industry. Writers on these three quality fantastic shows frequently explore God or gods, divine prophecy, metaphysical purpose, and existential meaning, without fear of alienating their upscale target audiences or appear religious themselves because religion is easily discursively contained. The textual tropes and narratives are informed by and reflect traditional religions, particularly Christianity. Thus, I will often refer to the representations as religious even as the creatives working on these shows discuss them as spiritual. The gap between what is represented and how creatives discuss it is at the core of this study and is particularly necessary to highlight for this chapter what bridges realist quality strategies and fantastic generic strategies of containing the industrial risk of religion.

This chapter focuses on three such quality fantastic series with religious narratives that their creatives discuss as "spiritual." *Battlestar Galactica* (Sci Fi, 2003-2009), *Lost* (ABC, 2004-2010), and *The Leftovers* (HBO, 2014-) are shows that situate religion within the field of complex narrative strategies and employ religion as the overarching frame for the mysteries that

guide the entire series. For quality fantastic series, religion is contained through abstractions, but these abstractions maintain connection to metaphysical meaning. Even in the abstraction to spirituality, the function of religion remains in place. With this spiritual frame, the writers in these series can explore divine possibility without the risky ideology associated with religion.

To address the ways that religious discourses were negotiated among the shows' writers and producers, this chapter examines these three series and interviews with their writers and showrunners as well as with accompanying journalistic coverage and marketing materials. These three dramas used generic displacement to emphatically represent religion within the text of the show, and their writers and producers acknowledged this religiousness even as they abstract it to spirituality. This acknowledgement was only possible because these series are considered quality dramas by critics and within the industry, similar to the realist shows discussed in the previous chapter. Thus, the creatives working on these quality fantastic dramas were granted two levels of protection from the ideological risk, both of which also allowed for greater religious representation: generic displacement and quality distinction. For *Battlestar Galactica*, that combination as well as its niche cable outlet allowed for overt religious representation from the beginning. For *Lost*, its slower build toward both its fantastic generic elements and its quality designation meant that its religious representation remained vague until the final season. *The Leftovers* deemphasizes its fantastic generic traits in favor of quality (in keeping with HBO's brand) and thus displaces religious representation onto cults or, in the second season, the American South.

Each show has also used paratextual visuals that meld fantastic religious representation and quality. They mimicked familiar Renaissance art to cue viewers to the fantastic religious representation while also implicitly associating their shows with art. For example, both *Battlestar*

Galactica (see fig. 1 in Introduction) and *Lost* (see fig. 2 in Introduction) visually invoked religion in promotional images that situated the characters in a visual quotation of Leonardo Da Vinci's *The Last Supper*, activating religious discourses that would come to provide key elements of answers to their respective over-arching mysteries. But such linkages via marketing materials were made in these two shows only in their later seasons, once their approach to religion-as-spirituality has been deemed acceptable by executives and creatives for their target audiences of quality and fan viewers. *The Leftovers* similarly activated religion through visual extradiegetic means: for example, the show's first season title credits traced a vivid fresco—evoking Michelangelo's *Sistine Chapel* and similar church mural and ceiling paintings—that portrays the Rapture-like Sudden Departure that serves as the show's premise (fig. 3).[6] *The Leftovers* could articulate its religious representation more plainly than *Lost* and *Battlestar Galactica*; its industrial positioning and textual strategies emphasized its quality and de-emphasized its genre elements as well as its displacement of religion onto cults, which will be discussed further later.

Figure 3: Final image of *The Leftovers* season 1 title credits

These three shows collectively present a timeline and provide a range of examples for understanding how creatives absorbed and created religious content based on fantastic genre

expectations. In addition, they illustrate industrial assumptions about the quality audience as well as the fan audience – both of which were imagined as upscale and with non-religious tastes. The effect of these assumptions is a legacy of practices of containment using representational fields that the industry deemed acceptable for quality fantastic genre programs.

The recognition by creatives of the shows' religious (or, as noted above, "spiritual") themes is central to their narrative development. Creatives' acknowledgment of the spiritual quest for meaning aligns *Lost, Battlestar Galactica*, and *The Leftovers* with the quality realist dramas discussed in the previous chapter. The shows which provide the case studies for this chapter appeal to many of the aesthetic and formal characteristics of quality television addressed in the prior chapter as well, including: serialized narratives, grounded character development, and higher production values, for example.[7] In addition, their showrunners are often described in the same auteurist terms as their realist genre counterparts like Ray McKinnon and Peter Berg. The paratexts that discuss the showrunners' singular creative vision, such as reviews, interviews, promotional materials, Twitter conversations, and podcasts buttress their construction as auteurs.[8] Aesthetically, narratively, and in positioning through paratexts, *Battlestar Galactica, Lost,* and *The Leftovers* are quality fantastic dramas for which the quality designation helps to elevate the generic one.

The discourse generated by the creatives I spoke with as well as critics surrounding theses shows strongly emphasizes the socio-cultural verisimilitude and the groundedness of the writing, characters, and narrative to amplify their quality *bona fides* and bridge the gap between the fantastic genres and quality's assumed default to realism.[9] Catherine Johnson, in her study of the fantastic genres and their industrial discursive construction, discusses this balance of narrative and genre stakes in *Telefantasy*:

> These [fantastic] genres construct fictional worlds that do not correspond to the norms, rules and laws of everyday knowledge . . . What is plausible within a science-fiction film (and other non-verisimilitudinous genres) therefore conflicts with accepted notions of 'reality'. As such, all texts that represent the fantastic ask questions that push the boundaries of socio-cultural verisimilitude. . . However, this does not mean that these genres do not depend on socio-cultural verisimilitude to make their fictional worlds plausible or believable. Indeed, socio-cultural verisimilitude is a particularly important device in such genres.[10]

The reliance on socio-cultural verisimilitude that Johnson articulated is even more pronounced when fantastic series add quality markers to their representational field. Indeed, each quality fantastic drama in this chapter gains notions of quality through its socio-cultural verisimilitude, its ability to represent realistic relationships, tensions, questions, and events. *Battlestar Galactica* engages with the War on Terror culture of mid-2000s America while it also questions predestination and divine purpose. By its final seasons, *Lost* makes it clear that it is exploring the fundamental question of inherent human goodness and evil while equally focusing on the reality of complex human relationships in the wake of trauma. *The Leftovers* elliptically explores loss and family through the aftermath of a Rapture-like event. Each of these series' writers and producers talk about the shows as creative visions and personal writings, helping to further build quality status without dismissing their fantastic natures.

POST-9/11 AND POST-NETWORK ERA CONTEXT

Battlestar Galactica and *Lost*, both of which began airing as weekly series in 2004, dominated scholarly discussions of and critical engagement with religious narratives on

television in the first decade of the twenty-first century. As Diane Winston argues in the introduction to her anthology studying lived religion on television:

> The year 2000, and more precisely the tragic events of 9/11 [in 2001], provide a natural starting point for examining popular discourse on religion, ethics, and spirituality. The confluence of George Bush's presidency (i.e., the candidate who named Jesus Christ as his favorite political philosopher) and the political ascendancy of the religious Right; the coalescence and deployment of political Islam, and growing concerns about climate change begat an acute apocalyptic sensibility among true believers and a heightened sense of anxiety among everyone else.[11]

Winston encapsulates the culture of fear that, with the increased discourse and visibility of religion in the first years of the new millennium, shaped the development of the first two shows of this chapter's study: *Battlestar Galactica* and *Lost*.

Battlestar Galactica was the first of these three shows to air, and the first to feature a central and extensive focus on religious structures and concerns. It is both the vanguard of this trend and an exemplar of the gap between religious representation and creatives' discussion of religion. *Battlestar Galactica* began with a two-part miniseries in 2003 that would become the prologue to the series that ran from 2004 to 2009 on the genre-oriented, niche cable outlet, the Sci Fi Channel. In the early 2000s, before *Battlestar Galactica* appeared, Sci Fi's prime-time programming consisted primarily of light or campy science fiction fare like *Mystery Science Theater 3000* (1988-1999 [1997-1999 on Sci Fi]), Australian space opera *Farscape* (1999-2003) and the spy-fi update on *The Invisible Man* (2000-2002). The programming in the early 2000s shifted to include a crop of higher-end miniseries like Stephen Spielberg's *Taken* (2002) and *Battlestar Galactica*. In 2003, Sci Fi initiated a channel rebranding which included promotional

spots that asked, "what if?" Such spots, according to Barbara Selznick, were designed to develop the channel's "brand image as a source of imagination, the fantastical in the everyday, the extraordinary in the common."[12] *Battlestar Galactica* appeared two years after 9/11 and displayed the significant impact of this culturally transformative event.

Battlestar Galactica's first years on the Sci Fi Channel also coincided with significant industrial shifts at the niche cable outlet. In the time between *Battlestar Galactica*'s miniseries in December 2003 and its first full season of episodes which appeared in October 2004, Sci Fi, which was owned by Universal became part of the newly-formed NBC/Universal media conglomerate. This shift in ownership came with attendant corporate pressures to broaden the channel's target audience from niche sci-fi genre fans.[13] NBC/Universal wanted Sci Fi to extend beyond its core male-skewing genre audience, but "at the same time Sci Fi worked to establish itself as the destination spot for high-quality sf [science fiction] television."[14] The desire to establish a cable channel brand with high-end original programming for added value was not Sci Fi's alone. FX, USA, and other cable outlets were beginning to produce original content to distinguish themselves in the crowded cable marketplace. It is within this context that *Battlestar Galactica* appeared, supported by a channel striving for genre quality within the decision-making volatility of an industry in transition.

Simultaneous with *Battlestar Galactica*'s transition from miniseries to series on basic cable, J.J. Abrams developed *Lost* as a broadcast pilot for ABC. By this time in 2004, Abrams had proven himself with *Alias* (ABC, 2001-2006), but he had not yet made the jump to feature films such as *Mission Impossible III* (Abrams, 2006) and *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (Abrams, 2015). While Abrams was a key figure in developing the show's supernatural premise and its pilot – which at the time became notorious for being the most expensive pilot ever made –

he would not be the showrunner for *Lost.*[15] In fact, Abrams largely removed himself from the production. Instead, *Lost*'s writers' room and authorial brand came under the control of experienced showrunner Carlton Cuse (*The Adventures of Brisco County Jr.* [Fox, 1993-1994], *Nash Bridges* [CBS, 1996-2001]) together with Damon Lindelof, Abram's co-writer on the pilot. Their partnership, and especially Lindelof's authorial voice, would become markers of the auteurist sensibility and quality branding of *Lost*. As Levine and Newman argue, "the showrunner-auteur is a branding strategy for upscale television" – and such a strategy certainly was in effect here.[16] Moreover, *Lost*'s surprising success among a coalition of upscale viewer niches, in true post-network style, helped to reinforce ABC as a broadcast channel in which quality could be found and fostered.[17] ABC and the network's willingness to take risks with both *Lost* and its network peer, *Desperate Housewives* (ABC, 2004-2012), marked ABC and its new dramas in contrast to the new shows of the previous broadcast season, including *Las Vegas* (NBC, 2003-2008), *NCIS* (CBS, 2003-), and *The Lyon's Den* (NBC, 2003) which were seen as largely redundant, formulaic, and without interesting ideas.[18] This coalition of upscale audiences included quality audiences, fan audiences, "critics, bloggers, and even some television researchers [who] credited its popularity to its character-driven storylines and, most importantly, to the fact that no one could easily explain the answers to the many questions the program raised."[19] *Lost*'s supernatural mysteries and its popularity among upscale audiences helped to contain the risk of the show's eventual reveal of its spiritual premise and framing.

Lost and *Battlestar Galactica* were largely contemporaneous with each other and often put together in conversation by both critics and viewers regarding quality, genre, and religious representation.[20] Critics and viewers frequently noted their parallel attention to spirituality.[21] *The Leftovers* began airing three years after the conclusion of *Lost*, and involved one of its two

showrunners, Damon Lindelof, in its creation. Notably, *The Leftovers* carried similar traits of quality fantastic approaches to religion that appeared in the mid-2000s. Yet *The Leftovers* as a program featured on pay-cable network HBO was not beholden to particular genre branding as was *Battlestar Galactica* on Sci Fi nor to the necessities of broadcast television as was *Lost*. HBO had established its brand of quality television in the 1990s with comedies like *The Larry Sanders Show* (1992-1998) and reinforced this branding with late 1990s-early 2000s shows like *The Sopranos* (1999- 2007) and *The Wire* (2002-2008).[22] However, in the late 2000s and early 2010s, with its tent-pole quality series ended, HBO had lost its dominance as a place for consistent quality.[23] The HBO at the time that *The Leftovers* was developed and began airing was one that continued to brand itself as a quality outlet but had fewer successful examples to show for it as cable channels like FX and AMC became known for their quality dramas.[24] Moreover, HBO's subscription base was in decline, perhaps due to the rise in streaming platforms like Netflix.[25] In 2014, HBO was struggling to revised its strategy and rebuild its brand in an emergent streaming universe with more fractured audiences, a struggle that perhaps aided *The Leftovers'* development. *The Leftovers* ostensibly was provided more space for the exploration of religion through fantastic spiritual abstraction. Its appearance on pay cable outlet HBO and the quality aspects inherent in its status as a literary adaptation contributed to creating a production culture and textual strategies focused on quality characteristics that largely downplayed generic aspects of *The Leftovers* while still utilizing the hesitation granted by a supernatural premise. Almost a decade after *Lost* and *Battlestar Galactica*, the series provided a vaguer, but more realistic representation of religion. The two earlier shows display both more and more overt religious representation, even abstracted and displaced, than *The Leftovers* does until it can displace religion onto the American South, a quality realist strategy gained by downplaying its

fantastic genre elements. Despite ten years separating *The Leftovers* from *Lost* or even the realist *Friday Night Lights*, its creatives remain inculcated by the pervasive sense of religion as risk. *The Leftovers*, like *Rectify* in the previous chapter, illustrates the persistence of ideological risk associated with working with religious representation across the span of the boom in religious programming. Texts, genres, target audiences, outlets, and historical and industrial contexts change in ways that alter how religion is represented and conceptualized by creatives, but the risk felt by those creatives remains.

CONTAINMENT THROUGH DISPLACEMENT: *BATTLESTAR GALACTICA*

Battlestar Galactica was a remake of the1970s cult sci-fi show of the same name (ABC, 1978-1979) that Glen A. Larson (*Magnum, P.I.* [CBS, 1980-1988], *Knight Rider* [NBC, 1982-1986]) created. The 2003 remake adapted characters as well as the original premise of a war between humans and robotic cylons. Although the twenty-first century version shares a deep connection to spiritual stories evident in the original series, in the 1970s version, spirituality was primarily expressed by drawing inspiration from Mormon cosmology. It did so by naming the planets among which the characters navigated with variations on Mormon names, like Kobol referencing the Mormon paradise star/planet Kolob. These expressions of cosmology in name variations seem minor, but they were, however, overt in the context of 1970s television models. In the early 2000s version, *Battlestar Galactica* maintained some of the Mormon-inflected names but also moved into deeper and more explicit engagement with religion and spirituality. The show gained the label of quality among critics and within the industry by virtue of its incredibly complex plot, rich character relationships, and layered religious representations.[26]

The series premise began with the nuclear annihilation of the human home-world, Caprica, through the machinations of the cylons. This destruction left the human government in

the hands of the Secretary of Education, Laura Roslin (Mary McDonnell), and the Commander of the battlestar spaceship *Galactica*, William Adama (Edward James Olmos). *Galactica* housed the majority of the surviving humans. Adama's crew formed the basis of the series' main characters including: Kara "Starbuck" Thrace (Katee Sackhoff), Karl "Helo" Agathon (Tamoh Penikett), and Sharon "Boomer" Valerii (Grace Park) who is revealed during the first season to be a cylon. A main departure of the 2000s series from the 1970s version is that the robot-looking cylons still exist, but they have also evolved to become a ruling class of human-looking cylons. These eight human-looking models of cylons (practically seven, since one model is defunct) replicate as much as needed. Replication results in multiple Sharon/Number Eight models (see Fig. 4), for example. There are two different Sharons who serve as main characters throughout the series: Sharon "Boomer" Valerii, who is a sleeper agent who believes she is human at the beginning of the series, and Sharon "Athena" Agathon nee Valerii, who knows she is a cylon from the beginning, but falls in love with Helo, a human, as she seduces him to try to create a human-cylon hybrid that is prophesized in the cylon religion.

Figure 4: There are many copies of Sharon (cylon model number eight).

The cylons and humans have disparate religions that guide them: the cylons believe in a monotheistic god that draws heavily from Abrahamic religion, while the humans worship polytheistic gods with Hellenic names such as Athena and Artemis. The characters' beliefs in these religions guide much of the action in the series. Their beliefs function to determine who is a real prophet for the future of humanity, how the fleet will find their new home-world (Earth, according to prophecy), and the meaning of the tagline "all of this has happened before and all of it will happen again." Their beliefs guide both the overarching narrative of the series as well as many of the interpersonal conflicts and tensions that motivate the series ongoing dramatic urgency over five seasons. Religious beliefs are used to justify attempts at genocide, creation of internment camps, suicide missions, and a war of terror (and a war on terror). These beliefs act as televisual reflections of much of the wider cultural post-9/11 context.

According to Ronald D. Moore, the creator and showrunner of *Battlestar Galactica* who wrote the miniseries-*cum*-pilot, the religious narrative was built into the series from the beginning. However, Moore's ideological inculcation of religious risk within industry culture originally shaped the creative team's initial approach to religion. When developing the project, Moore assumed that religion was something that had to be sneaked into the script rather than dealt with head on. Only by going undetected by network executives could religion be featured within the show, at least initially. Moore said that he added the line "God is love" to the cylon Caprica Six's (Tricia Helfer) dialogue in the miniseries as a way to test the waters for the kind of "spirituality" he wanted to explore later in the show. He said, "I didn't want to play it strongly in the pilot [but] an executive at Sci Fi seized on it [and wanted more]."[27] The executive's reaction countered Moore's internalized assumption going into production that religion was undesirable for a cable show targeting upscale audiences. This moment of surprise on his part is significant.

On the one hand, it manifests the influence of the powerful legacy practices of self-policing that by the early 2000s had become internalized within the industry regarding religion. Moore's training as a staff writer for *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (1987-1994) and *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* (1993-1999) ingrained in him the idea that religion was risky and unavailable to use for storylines unless hidden, sneaked in, or contained within the show. On the other hand, this encounter reveals a moment of rupture in the consistent narrative of religious avoidance within the post-network era television industry that made this ideology of religion-as-risky more visible *as an ideology* not a fact. In disrupting what was assumed to be common sense and natural—that religion is to be avoided—the moment of surprise revealed to Moore that what he thought was rigid logic was in fact subject to change if not abandonment, with regard to religious representation.

This moment of surprise allowed Moore and the writers' room he helmed to represent religion more thoroughly and diversely than what had previously appeared on television. Nevertheless, the ideology of "religious television is middlebrow television" persisted enough to lead Moore and other *Battlestar Galactica* writers to avoid the religious label in their discussions of the show, instead opting for the more abstract and acceptable "spiritual" adjective in describing their work and the show. Even as religious representational barriers fell for *Battlestar Galactica*'s showrunner, the ideology ossified in the 1990s that made creatives avoid association with religion (if only by calling it spirituality) remained a powerful shaper of industrial discourses about religious representation.

Representing Religion Through Allegory Post-9/11

The miniseries, through Caprica Six's dialogue about God and subsequent explanation of her exceptional belief in a single God as opposed to gods, established the show's monotheistic vs.

polytheistic divide. Further, by making the cylons monotheistic terrorists, the show engaged allegorically with the increased cultural attention to religion in post-9/11 America. *Battlestar Galactica* consistently represented versions of real-world debates and events tied to the post-9/11 cultural context through fantastic displacement of that content to a fantastic fictional space and time. Allegory is one prominent method of elevating fantastic genres, enabling them to conform to notions of quality. Allegory allows the exploration of facets of human life and society that might not be as available for representation on television. *Battlestar Galactica* particularly explored one of those difficult-to-address facets of humanity: faith.

In my interview with him, Moore said that 9/11 resonated throughout the show's development process. However in a separate interview, staff writer Bradley Thompson remembered the consensus prescription from the showrunners and among the writers against drawing direct parallels in their writing between the specifics of the actual terrorist attacks and the events of the show.[28] The real-world events created an atmosphere that heavily informed the writing of the show. Though they informed the creative context within which the show was developed, the writers maintained that direct parallels to the events themselves were avoided. Similarly, the show did not dwell on the destruction of Caprica, except to the extent that the destruction instigated a culture of fear, survival, and brinkmanship amongst survivors. The writers of *Battlestar*, guided by Ron Moore's vision, focused first and foremost on telling human stories. This is what almost every story writer says about his or her work, of course. What is significant here is that *Battlestar Galactica* distinguished itself by portraying human stories that included struggles with faith, purpose, and religious systems as an integral part of their telling. Such aspects of many people's lives were generally absent from television aimed at upscale audiences prior to the early-2000s. *Battlestar Galactica*'s quality fantastic allegory allowed for

religion to be part of the human stories that the writers told without encroaching on the religious risk that prevailed within the industry.

When a show such as *Battlestar Galactica* is first in a representational shift and focuses intently on the new story's tone and subject matter, that show confronts risk and precarity within the television industry, as well as potential reward.[29] *Battlestar Galactica* benefitted from a number of factors that helped mitigate the writers' sense of risk. One way that the show circumvented risk was through its placement in the science fiction genre. Bradley Thompson was a writer who had worked on a number of fantastic shows both before and since *Battlestar Galactica*, including *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* (syndication, 1993-1999), *Falling Skies* (TNT, 2011-2015), and *The Strain* (FX, 2014-). When asked if anything surprised him about the production of *Battlestar Galactica* and its religious storylines, he stated that he was surprised that "we got away with it at all." He further explained that the network was very supportive and even liked the religious stories.[30] This corroborates the aforementioned discussion that Sci Fi was not worried about the show's use of religion, which Ron Moore's encounter with the Sci Fi executive who wanted to know more about "God is Love" illustrates. Sci Fi executives' comfort with the show's religious content was another fortuitous factor enabling the show to explore religion in its representation, themes, and content. But hesitation when discussing religion persisted among the show's creatives. *Battlestar Galactica*'s genre was fortuitously situated on a niche cable outlet that both supported the science fiction genre and enabled the greater embrace of religious content because of its network's shifting corporate context. Prior cultural and industrial perceptions of risk regarding the representation of religion could be violated in part due to a corporate restructuring process that demanded a greater flexibility and openness among management seeking branding and distinction.

Representing Religion on the Sci Fi Channel

During interviews, the *Battlestar* writers I spoke with remembered that the channel was in a state of transition during the early run of the show. This moment of transition occasionally allowed *Battlestar Galactica* to slip through the cracks of executive overreach. In later seasons, when management power at the channel stabilized, the show had become enough of a phenomenon with critics and journalists that the executives were not inclined to step in as much as they might have been before or after the company's period of transition.[31] To support his claim that Sci Fi was surprisingly unconcerned by the religious storylines, writer Bradley Thompson shared a small sampling of the network notes he received for one of his and writing partner David Weddle's scripts, "The Hand of God," the tenth episode of the first season. Significantly, the notes focused almost entirely on plot legibility and clarity, not on religious content, even though the episode dealt explicitly with religious prophecy.

Battlestar Galactica helped place the Sci Fi Channel within the budding nexus of basic cable channels producing quality programming. The mid-2000s saw a number of basic cable channels beginning to air original programming that sought to attract quality audiences. FX's *The Shield* (2002-2008) used its edgy approach to law enforcement to gain critical attention, including a Peabody Award in 2005.[32] USA Network aired its own upscale science-fiction dramas *The Dead Zone* (2002-2007) and *The 4400* (2004-2007) before establishing its 2000s original programming brand a home for quirky mystery dramas with *Monk* (2002-2009) and *Psych* (2006-2014). And AMC began airing the British series *Hustle* (2004-2012) before establishing itself as the "quality" basic cable channel with *Mad Men* (2007-2014) and *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013).[33] The quality designation briefly granted Sci Fi and *Battlestar Galactica*'s creative team cultural capital within the industry. The specific transition of power that Sci Fi experienced as *Battlestar Galactica* began airing was part of the much wider industrial transition

in the early twenty-first century addressed in this dissertation's introduction. The channel's position in the emerging televisual landscape and its science fiction generic brand identity mitigated risk for *Battlestar Galactica.*

Sci Fi was arguably the cable channel best suited to provide the most intense focus on religion in a show not aimed for a religious audience *because* it was dedicated to the genre most associated with tackling controversial issues through allegory. While the fact that a Sci Fi executive picked up the religious element in the miniseries is surprising, it is not surprising that a science fiction show would be and—along with fantasy and horror series—remains the most likely genre to feature religious storylines on television. Sci Fi's specific industrial position in 2003-2004, in the wake of its rebranding and becoming part of the NBC/Universal conglomerate was unique. This status allowed the network to engage in a more sustained focus on religion and spirituality than other programming on television either before or since. *Battlestar Galactica* is both a vanguard and one of the most pronounced exemplars of the 2003-2016 boom in religious programming.

In contrast to *Battlestar Galactica*'s early exploration of religion in its narrative, *Lost's* writers bided their time, waiting until well into the show's run before revealing its spiritual focus. *Lost* slowly, and with apparent calculation, shifted from broader supernatural representation to more pointed spiritual stories. Indeed, it was only in *Lost*'s last season that the ongoing spiritual discussion and representation on the show approached the level *Battlestar Galactica* consistently displayed throughout the course of its run. Such variation in representation can be seen to be a function of the different creative and industrial contexts within which *Lost* developed and evolved.

Quality Science Fiction: Ambiguity and Flawed Prophets

Within the context of quality dramas of the post-network era, the creators of *Battlestar Galactica* intentionally made it "messy," meaning ambiguous in narrative, themes, style, and even religious representation.[34] Scholar Chris Klassen points out the dual perspective that the show creates regarding religion as it presses deeper into the psychology of the cylons. He writes, "From the Cylon perspective, the humans have strayed from the one True God. From the human perspective, the Cylons use their belief and devotion to the one deity to justify their evil acts of destruction."[35] Both sides are presented as at fault in their war, and both sides' use of religion to justify their actions is presented as suspect. This suspicion strongly speaks to the post-9/11 context that collapsed the characteristics of "Muslim" and "enemy" for some Americans. Moreover, the war on terror that followed 9/11 occasionally evoked the Crusades; the show provided an allegorical critique of an invasion of Islamic countries by a dominantly Christian nation espousing self-righteousness. This is the allegory, but not direct correlation, that Moore and his writers emphasized in their discussions with me. Moral complexity such as seeing fault on both sides of a conflict is a key component of quality drama, providing strong contrast to a more black-and-white moral universe presented in programs appealing to middlebrow tastes. Challenging and ambiguous narrative and moral content targets upscale audiences, a key point of distinction from the more unchallenging presentations of religion that chapter one examines.[36]

The deliberate ambiguousness of *Battlestar Galactica*'s representation of religion became even more pronounced as the series continued over its four seasons. The war and the distinction between "good guys" and "bad guys" became increasingly muddled in the third season as the cylons became an occupying force and humans an insurgent resistance. Also during course of this third season, the ambiguous lines between cylons and humans also became increasingly unstable. In the fourth season, the show revealed five characters who were thought to be human,

but were in fact the final five cylons to be discovered. These Final Five were modeled after the humans who created the first humanoid cylons. Within this existential and tactical messiness, religion in the show also became a point of greater instability. A realignment of what was the two belief systems took place due to these new plot revelations, calling into question what had been previously known about the history of cylons, humans, and their interconnectedness. Humans created the cylons but not just as robots; the Final Five reveal a relationship between them and the cylons similar to God(s) and humanity, as children of the creator. This throws the division between monotheism and polytheism (and their warring prophecies and prophets) into confusion.

The growing ambiguity of belief evident in later seasons manifested through two potential prophets: Gaius Baltar (James Callis), a monotheist, and Laura Roslin, a polytheist. The use of prophecy at the heart of *Battlestar Galactica*'s religious narrative insulated the show within both genre expectations and quality narrative strategies. The prophets on *Battlestar* are both shown to be flawed humans. As one science fiction author and critic notes, "The two putative prophets of the respective gods in question are both irretrievably and morally compromised."[37] Both wrestle with notions of purpose in a mode familiar to quality character development, but their visions are contained within the expectations of fantastic genres that allow for magic, psychic visions, or hallucinations without necessarily implying divine provenance attributable to an identifiable religious deity. This containment ruptures, however, in the series finale, when the narrative "proves" the monotheist prophet, Baltar correct by evoking a traditional religion. Baltar's prophetic visions ultimately save both the humans and cylons. These visions reappear hundreds of thousands of years into the future and embrace a singular, male-gendered God. The final moments of the show use these prophetic visions to reorient the show's

religious representation out of space and science fiction and into the patriarchal monotheism familiar to its post-Christian audience. Without the containment that the displacement of forms from the "real world" to the fantastic world provides a television show, *Battlestar Galactica's* finale became categorized as an example of *deus ex machina*, with an emphasis on the *deus*. The finale became a place where the abstraction of religion was reduced in its representation; spirituality became reinscribed in the tropes of Christianity. The ambiguity provided by abstraction diminished as religious representation became more familiar as overt and traditional Christianity. "Angels," watching over humans, referring to God as a male entity—these elements of the finale are, in isolation, similar to the religious representation in *Touched by an Angel*. The quality and fantastic characteristics of *Battlestar Galactica* keep it from being perceived by the writers as "preachy," but it is a near thing. By concluding in such a manner, the finale became dangerous to discuss; indeed, no *Battlestar* writer that I spoke with addressed the ending's treatment of religion. Bradley Thompson came closest when he admitted that the writers knew they would "get flack" for ultimately positioning Kara Thrace as an ambiguous angel in the finale.[38] In providing a similarly spiritual conclusion to the series, *Lost* faced similar blowback from many viewers and critics, a problem with any serialized show with dedicated fan audiences whose high expectations are difficult to fulfill. *Lost* differed in its greater reticence to engage in religious representations and themes earlier in its run.

ABSTRACTION TO SUPERNATURAL SPIRITUALITY: *LOST*

Lost's premise was relatively simple: a group of plane crash survivors must figure out how to live on and someday escape from a mysterious island. The show was notable at the time of its premiere for its sprawling and diverse ensemble cast of characters: Jack Shepherd (Matthew Fox), a doctor transporting his dead father home; Sawyer (Josh Holloway), a smooth

con-man; Kate (Evangeline Lilly), a criminal; Jin (Daniel Dae Kim) and Sun (Yunjin Kim), a Korean couple struggling with their marriage roles; Hurley (Jorge Garcia), an affable lottery winner; Sayid (Naveen Andrews), an Iraqi intelligence officer; Charlie (Dominic Monaghan), a drug-addicted rock star; Claire (Emilie de Ravin), a near-to-term pregnant woman; and John Locke (Terry O'Quinn), a former paraplegic. These are just the characters introduced in the first few episodes of the series who remained main characters throughout the series' run. Many more characters were added over the show's six seasons, as the castaways discovered survivors from the tail end of the plane, found people left over from the pseudo-scientific Dharma Initiative on the island, left the island and came back, and encountered the two powerful archetypal entities who used the island as their grand experiment about the nature of humanity. For many scholars and critics, *Lost* represented the pinnacle of the emergent trend of narrative complexity; it provided a key example of a new mode of storytelling in which upscale fan audiences could view shows repeatedly and analyze and discuss the intricacies of their stories in online spaces.[39] Less discussed than these narrative and reception-oriented characteristics, however, was how the show's story structure incentivized ambiguous religious representation, especially in its early seasons.

Waiting for Religious Representation

Lost's first seasons are populated by storylines that had little to do with religion or even abstract spirituality. While some characters like Mr. Eko (Adewale Akinnuoye-Agbaje), a relatively short-lived addition to the castaways, were religious, the religious or spiritual elements were largely relegated to appearing among the small clues to the series' bigger mystery, such as the statuettes of the Virgin Mary being used to distribute heroin. These clues appeared sporadically throughout the show, and their purpose and relationship to the larger mystery and

character arcs was largely unknown until later seasons. In an interview, co-showrunner Damon Lindelof said that neither the writers nor the network were ever hesitant to represent spiritual storylines. Instead he remembers the writers' desire to establish the characters in the first two seasons—adding in and exploring the implications of the presence of the tail side of the plane in the second season—as the necessary foundation for getting the audience to care about the wider mysteries and spiritual themes to be addressed later in the show's run. Lindelof explained that it wasn't until the end of the first season that he, his co-showrunner Carlton Cuse, and the rest of the writers had the opportunity to discuss the "big questions," but he said that he "always knew the concept for the island . . . as a place where God and the Devil could test the hypothesis: are humans naturally good or naturally bad."[40] From the beginning, he planned for the island's smoke monster to behave like the Devil, tempting the castaways with their deepest desires. Christian culture strongly informed his discussion of this premise, particularly in terms of its focus on temptation as the mode of exploring evil. Lindelof, throughout his interview, implied that his vision was more assertively religious and that "ambiguity and spirituality are where we migrated toward eventually."[41] He made it clear that this was not a directive from ABC, but he also said that ABC was pleased with the series' ambiguity, pushing them to "keep it going [and] don't answer too much."[42] The push for narrative ambiguity, and the suggestion that Lindelof backed off of some of his more explicit exploration of the "big questions," implies a continuing perceived risk attached to religious storylines, even for a phenomenally popular drama within the purportedly safe genre of fantasy.

Because the spiritual elements that would eventually be a major part of the show's overarching storyline and conclusion were not necessarily evident in the early seasons (and therefore not necessarily evident in early network meetings and decisions about the show), *Lost*

had a lot of leeway to establish itself and its mysterious island-based storyworld early on. As the show progressed, spiritual and religious questions and answers began to make their way into the story of the island, particularly with the introduction of the character Jacob (Mark Pellegrino) in the last episodes of season five. Jacob is a somewhat divine personification of goodness who is revealed to have appeared at key moments of decision for the major characters. Lindelof, when answering questions about the show's spiritual storyline, focused on the battle between Jacob, as the fiduciary for God, and The Man in Black/Smoke Monster (Titus Welliver) who was the essence of the worst of humanity. The Man in Black represented chaos and immorality and was confined to the island until he and Jacob could resolve their grand experiment testing the nature of humankind: is it good or bad. While the Man in Black was trapped on the island, Jacob was not. Jacob, as is revealed through flashbacks in later seasons, was there to offer comfort, gentle guidance, and sympathy to many of the characters in moments of great choice and great sadness. He was there to remind them of hope and of their connection to other people. He appears to have some powers of omniscience and is able to transport himself between locations. The Man in Black focuses on temptation; Jacob focuses on love. They both fit into archetypes that align closely with the Devil and God (or even with God in the Old versus the New Testament). According to Lindelof, the team eventually shifted away from the idea of Jacob and the Man in Black as literal constructs of these big ideas, and instead had them serve "more as fiduciaries" of those entities who could carry out the work of setting up their experiment and interact with the other characters.[43] The mere abstraction of the traditional religious beings—God and the Devil—allows for these characters to occupy the middle-ground between religion and supernatural mythology. They can function *as if* without gaining the risky weight of being called by religious titles. Such abstraction both appeases the network desire for continued ambiguity while allowing

Lindelof to tell spiritual stories without the fear of either concluding narrative threads too soon or being associated with religious as a middlebrow taste marker. The persistent mystery and ambiguity was being encouraged by ABC for its appeal to upscale target audiences.

The final season, and particularly the final episode, of *Lost*, however, more directly and dramatically revealed the centrality of the spiritual storyline that had shaped the series in subtle ways up to that point. The show's narrative concludes by explaining that the island that served as mysterious setting for the series housed a mystical light that connects all of humanity. The desire for this light and its power is what pits Jacob and the Man in Black against each other and brings various cycles of humans to the island. Moreover, the series ends by ambiguously revealing that the characters have all been waiting for each other after their individual deaths, so that they could all pass to the afterlife together. They have been waiting in a church – even if the church contains a variety of symbols for other religions and beliefs. They exit to the afterlife out the church doors, past two baptismal founts, and into a bright white light. Although the representational bricolage housed in the church (Fig. 4) and the vaguely spiritual "light" of the island both nod to Lindelof's claims of spirituality, the fact that the bricolage is contained in a church and the view of the afterlife is mostly Christian illustrate the post-Christian sensibility and its influence. Lindelof can claim spirituality and use the postmodern combination of beliefs to support that narrative claim, but the influence of Christian culture on American culture—with the Church contributing to the legibility of the afterlife—remains strong even as it is denied by creatives.

Figure 5: The conclusion of *Lost* occurs in a church with a religious bricolage window.

Lost's approach of waiting to represent religion until later seasons preserved the ambiguity of its spiritual story. This practice of delay has since become a legacy strategy of containment that can be contrasted to *Battlestar Galactica*'s early-on approach of containing religion through displacement into a fantastically unreal world. (Shows such as *Supernatural* and *Daredevil,* discussed in later chapters, share this affinity for hesitation.) Lindelof said that the hesitation and postponement was about establishing the show's quality characteristics through character development. Nonetheless, his team's approach aligns with the pervasive sense by creatives and executives of religion as risky, something especially pronounced during the early years of the religious narrative boom. Hints of religious abstractions arise within the show, so that religion is not antithetical to a targeted audience's enjoyment of the show. As long as those abstractions do not disrupt the verisimilitude that the show's containment practices effect, new content becomes accessible to the writers, producers, and executives, the representational field of the text, and the marketing strategies of the show.

Such hesitation to represent overtly traditional religious concepts is indicative of the self-policing that Ron D. Moore illustrated in his "God is love" anecdote. The legacy structures of the television industry regarding representation changed dramatically in the post-network era in that religion was now a usable representational element in quality and fantastic modes of dramatic programming. Religious representation broke out of the middlebrow ghetto with *Battlestar Galactica.* The practices of ideologically containing religion for the writers and producers working on these shows, however, remained shaped by the idea of religion as risk. These showrunners' stories about executives openly embracing religious representations in personal cases of boundary testing illustrate the textual transformation and its persistent ideological limitations for creatives. Writers frequently still self-police and hold back from inserting or acknowledging religious narratives – at least until they feel safe within the structures of containment that allow audiences to tolerate, if not embrace, religion. This paradox, in which incipient constraints on religious content dissipate as the target audience accepts and engages with the religious representation of a show, is essential to understanding the post-network boom in religious representation. This paradox must be viewed in relation to the simultaneous persistent perceived risk within the mainstream television industry of engaging with or explicitly acknowledging an engagement with religion among industry peers as well as the wider public. Significantly, in 2003 and 2004, *Lost* and *Battlestar Galactica* presented this modality of progressive introduction of religion into a show as the avant-garde. Yet despite new channels and platforms, greater demographic targeting, and emerging distribution outlets in the intervening dozen years, little has changed in terms of dominant ideologies of executives and creative regarding religion. For a more specific example of the limited changes in terms of industry practice and representational possibilities, the final chapter explores how *Daredevil* on Netflix

has employed a very similar strategy of initial hesitation then, following praise and popularity among the right audience segments, more explicit highlighting of its religious content.

Quality and Fantastic Risks in the Broadcast Context

The spiritual elements on *Lost* were not the most radical and risky parts of the show when it began. As Gregg Nations, a writer for *Lost*, remembers, ABC took a big risk in supporting the show because its serialization and fantastic genre elements were rare on broadcast at the time. He states in an interview that his memory of the show's legacy was that "genre television wasn't really a thing yet [on broadcast, and] the science fiction stuff was unknown and risky," as was the serialized storytelling.[44] This is part of *Lost*'s ongoing appeal with viewers and critics as well as its categorization as a quality fantastic show: it provided a template and high-risk high-reward transmedia franchise model for post-network era television. In his recounting of the mid-2000s genre landscape, Nations omitted cable science fiction series like *Battlestar Galactica*, netlet fantasy programming like *Supernatural* (see next chapter), as well as subtler supernatural dramas like *Alias* (ABC, 2001-2006) and *Joan of Arcadia* (CBS, 2003-2005). In doing so, he implies that the creativity displayed by *Lost* was unique. According to Nations, ABC was dubious about the show because the genre was still considered niche, and ABC wanted "as big an audience as they could get."[45] He said that ABC also wanted a character-driven drama, which they believed could draw a "big hit" type of ratings, *Lost* did in fact provide ABC with a character-driven drama, along with the added element of an ongoing mystery designed to get the big audience ABC wanted. At the time ABC bought that there was an audience for a show that married the idea of a plane crash (a cultural preoccupation in a post 9/11 world) and the idea of castaways on an island making do a lá *Survivor.*[46] ABC executives told Lindelof and Cuse not to serialize the show and not to "make it weird;" they did it anyway, according to Lindelof, although they did

initially balance it with some more episodic storytelling.[47] ABC went along with Lindelof and Cuse, because the show succeeded from the outset, becoming a cultural phenomenon that was a great success for the network.[48] Eventually, as the show began to delve more deeply into spiritual concerns, network executives did not care, or at least they did not care enough to voice any substantive concerns to the showrunners.[49] The show had already proven its worth and established its brand. To make its spirituality more overt was not a business risk anymore, merely a narrative one and a cultural one within the writers' room and the larger ideology of Hollywood.

Both Lindelof and Nations said they knew that the viewer reaction to the final season's spiritual turn would be mixed. Lindelof in particular cited the increased permeability between audience and writers as the show went on, indicating that as a forerunner in new media interactivity between producers and viewers, the creative team was aware of audience expectations and reactions.[50] Lindelof and Cuse were cognizant of fan expectations, or at least had an understanding of how fans actively engaged via fora like Lostpedia and Twitter. Those expectations and fan constructions generally were not in support of receiving spiritual answers. The perceived resistance of viewers on the part of the creatives supports one of the many assumptions that has guided the development of spiritual and religious storylines on television dramas: that fan audiences, like quality audiences, are inherently oppositional to religious stories.[51]

Fear and hesitancy have shaped the beliefs by those involved in television productions regarding storylines that utilize religious themes and concepts. To the writers on these fantastic shows, such fear and hesitancy would be a hindrance to their project and vision because they were trying to represent unreality that necessitates wider imaginations. Yet before *Lost* and

Battlestar Galactica, that mode was the only way they had seen to represent religious storylines. Reacting to this dominant – and constraining – ideology, writers assumed that their shows' upscale viewers would not necessarily react well to an overtly religious story. Among many writers that I interviewed for this chapter and others, the fear of being seen as "preachy" (which they viewed as antithetical to quality) persisted. For *Lost*, in particular, this belief resulted in a slow-burn revelation of the show's narrative focus on religious and spiritual themes through the exploration of God, the Devil, and human nature. In contrast, *Battlestar Galactica,* and later, *The Leftovers,* placed their religious stories front and center – even though they also displaced or minimized the presence of religion through the shows' fantastic genre characteristics.

MINIMIZING GENRE, MAXIMIZING QUALITY: *THE LEFTOVERS*

The Leftovers is an adaptation of a novel (St. Martin's Press, 2011) published years after the premieres of *Lost* and *Battlestar Galactica*. However, its approach to both the fantastic and to spiritual story elements connect it to *Battlestar Galactica* and *Lost* as forerunners in quality fantastic programs. The novel by Tom Perrotta on which the series is based is considered "literary" in that it comes from an lauded author whose work has been adapted to the big screen with Academy Award-nominated film adaptations, such as *Little Children* (Field 2006).[52] When we spoke, Lindelof identified the quality elements of *The Leftovers* through the show's connection with realist literary adaptation. He observed, "*Lost* was more pulpy. JJ [Abrams] said we were doing a B-genre story with an A-level treatment . . .*The Leftovers* takes a fantastic concept and treats it with a grounded, realistic approach."[53] In direct contrast to *Lost*, Lindelof 's description of *The Leftovers'* frame for religious containment implies maximizing its quality elements while simultaneously minimizing its fantastic genre elements. A decade after *Lost,* this mode of containment resulted in a program that, while under the creative auspices of the same

showrunner *as Lost,* represents religion with less abstraction and more displacement (e.g., religion is placed onto the source text and the cults presented in *The Leftovers*).

As with the comic book adaptations that are discussed in chapter five, the religiously framed premise is a central part of the source text of *The Leftovers*. Damon Lindelof discussed his love of the book, *The Leftovers*, and his appreciation of Tom Perrotta as a writer as part of his account of how he came to adapt the book as an HBO series. He inherently emphasized the double quality aspects of the program as both a literary adaptation and a prestige drama for HBO.[54] When asked about the religious narrative and how his team handled it in translating it from the book to the show, Lindelof said that he always feels strange talking about the show's premise, because it is so much derived from Perrotta. In his mind, "it's Perrotta's baby;" Lindelof considers himself "just the caretaker."[55] Reliance on source text as the origin of the show's religious concepts is a strategy that creatives often use to distance themselves from the ideologically dangerous idea that they are religious or invested in religious messaging. For similar examples, Melissa Bernstein did it regarding Ray McKinnon's vision for *Rectify* described in chapter two*,* and adapters of comic book dramas did so regarding religious "gimmes" based on the source texts of their shows, as will be discussed in chapter five. In answer to my query regarding *The Leftovers*' development of its religious narrative, Lindelof did say that one of the questions driving his writing that he viewed as a takeaway from the book was "the human reaction to this mass experience that doesn't fit into any religious box; it blows up all religions, even atheism. When that happens, do you double down or abandon it in search of a new system?"[56]

The premise of *The Leftovers* is that at one point in recent history, ten percent of the human population disappeared, with no clear reason as to why it happened, how it happened, and

why those who were taken were chosen. It is called the Sudden Departure but borrows strongly from Christian notions of the Rapture. In both the book and the series, the characters strongly assert that this is not the Rapture that many Christian denominations believe in. The Pope was taken, yes, but so was Gary Busey.[57] What actually happened is a mystery, completely open to interpretation and promising no answers. This open question is part of the conceit of the show and part of its appeal to naturalistic and grounded character reactions to a world-wide, unavoidable supernatural event and a subsequent sense of fantastic possibilities for more supernatural effects. In response to this event, a number of cults arise. Lindelof's described the wake of the Sudden Departure as a time with "pockets of religions forming . . . in an age of prophets."[58] The fact that the Sudden Departure is never explained is also central to the show's source material. It serves as a direct rebuke of the criticisms levied against Lindelof on the conclusion of *Lost* that evoked demands for further answers. The narrative of *The Leftovers* and popular discourse around the show indicates that *Lost* taught Lindelof never to promise answers and that the move from broadcast to premium cable provided him a place on television where the audience more willingly accepts elliptical storytelling.[59] Moreover, the promise of no answer to the Rapture-like event allows the show's writers to avoid making any religious claims and to remain securely in the ambiguity that this mystery provides. The context of ambiguity allows for religious explanations, but it does not require them.

The adaptation of Perrotta's source text as well as the support of pay-cable distributor, HBO, granted Lindelof a great deal of freedom to explore religion less abstractly than he could on *Lost*. This was evidenced by his more open, explicit discussion of religion on *The Leftovers* versus his more careful manner when discussing the "spirituality" on *Lost.* However, the burden of religious representation in the first season of *The Leftovers* is largely placed on the "pockets of

religions" that are diegetically classified as cults. The supposed absence of faith following the Sudden Departure dominates while religious functions (aside from one exception in the form of Reverend Matt Jamison [Christopher Eccleston]) are taken over by cults such as the Guilty Remnant or followers of "Holy" Wayne Gilchrest.

The decidedly unresolved mystery of the event results in a narrative world that must dynamically grapple with notions of faith, belief, and religion. The narrative explores how flawed human characters understand their world, which is an established modality of quality dramas such as *Rectify* and *Lost*.[60] The first season follows the Garvey family of Mapleton, New York: Kevin (Justin Theroux), the father, taking care of his daughter, Jill (Margaret Qualley); Laurie (Amy Brenneman), the mother who left the family following the Sudden Departure; and Tom (Chris Zylka), a young man who is supposed to be at college but has become a follower of a supposed holy man, Wayne Gilchrest (Paterson Joseph).[61] In the context of a world after the Departure, traditional religions like Christianity are rocked into instability and a variety of new religions like cults arise. These cults represent the "age of prophets" about which Lindelof spoke, as noted above. They act to displace religious thinking safely onto "othered" groups, specifically cults that are positioned as outside of familiar, traditional religious traditions.

In both the source material and the television show, the main focus of this displacement of religion is a cult called the Guilty Remnant. The Guilty Remnant is categorized as a cult both culturally and by the diegetic government. They require all their adherents to conform to a collective identity of silence, smoking, and wearing all white. They believe themselves to be the necessary reminders of the disappearance and the nihilism that resulted. The show creates shocking representations of the members' cruel adherence to their belief that all who are left behind must constantly remember the disappearance of the others. They take advantage of the

distraction of a town's Christmas celebration to steal pictures of the vanished and then use those pictures to create life-like facsimiles of the vanished and pose them in the places and positions they were in at the moment of their disappearance. It is an unwelcome and powerful reminder on the anniversary of the vanishing that weaponized grief. The Guilty Remnant believe that such an act is holy and one they are called to do for the higher purpose of remembrance. Even more radically, the Guilty Remnant stage a stoning, actually killing one of their own, to force the community of Mapleton to acknowledge them. The stoning practice and its visual representation is meant to align them with a traditionally Christian motif.[62] Despite the fact that there are more adherents to the Guilty Remnant in Mapleton than to the Church by an order of magnitude, the Guilty Remnant is always characterized as a cult, and the only cult in this one town, even though a world of cults are now crossing the country and presumably the world. There is such a plethora of cults that the Department of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives has added Cults to its title and directive in this post-Disappearance America.

The followers of the supposed holy man, Wayne Gilchrest, comprise the other cult that the first season of *The Leftovers* introduces. Wayne is introduced as a mystical man who can take away people's pain with a mere hug – but for a price. For much of the first season, he is portrayed as a standard, stereotypical cult leader: an egomaniac who was especially adept at understanding psychology, giving him an aura of supernatural power and wisdom. He uses his skills to amass money and gather underage Asian women for his personal harem. He uses the trappings of religion and the desire of many after the departure for a new kind of savior. Similarly, the Guilty Remnant seems to fill a vacuum left when Christianity's hold on American culture waned following the non-Rapture rapture The Guilty Remnant provide a structure and a reasoning to life after the Sudden Disappearance and, thus, they gain followers. But by the end of

the season, Gilchrist's supposed powers are presented as less smoke-and-mirrors and more as potentially real. In the first season finale, Kevin Garvey encounters a dying Wayne in a diner's restroom.[63] Wayne entreats Kevin to make a wish, the granting of which, Wayne says, "…will mean I was real," revealing a chink in his egomania. It implies that even Wayne was unsure of his powers and wants to prove his chosenness as his last act on earth, hoping that proof of his power will outweigh his misdeeds and manipulations. Wayne looks to Kevin, who does not say his wish aloud, says, "Granted," and then dies. The viewer does not know precisely what Kevin wishes for, but based on his arc throughout the season, one presumes it is that he have his family made whole again. The final scenes of the episode feature a version of that with Kevin and Jill returning home to find his girlfriend, Nora (Carrie Coon), kept from leaving him by finding a baby—Wayne's child—on the Garvey front porch. It is not exactly what we presume Kevin wished for, but his disbelieving smile hints that it is close.

The question of Wayne's powers and his role as a potential prophet are one of many instances of supernatural occurrences on *The Leftovers* that could be truly marvelous or divine or might just be the result of delusions, psychological manipulation, or coincidence. The displacement of religion largely onto cults and the abstraction of religious representation into these few vaguely supernatural events (in the context of a massive supernatural event) follows containment strategies associated with ensuring such religious representation does not alienate the supposedly non-religious quality audience. Instead of using fantastic genre expectations to help contain these moments of the potentially divine (as the shows such as *Supernatural* and *Sleepy Hollow* studied in the next chapter do)*, The Leftovers* largely ignores fantastic genre elements in favor of employing quality strategies such as focusing on interpersonal relationships but not excess emotionalism, representing a full range of human experiences including addiction,

sex, and graphic violence, and presenting high production values and resulting "cinematic" aesthetics. Aside from Wayne's "granting" of Kevin Garvey's wish, the clearest instance of this fantastic hesitancy between divine and worldly explanations is Reverend Matt Jamison's endeavor to get enough money to keep his church from being bought by the Guilty Remnant in the third episode of season one, "Two Boats and a Helicopter."[64] Reverend Jamison is largely the nexus, especially in the first season, of traditional religious representation. However, the focus of that representation on one character allows it to be marginalized in a wider world of cults.

Beyond Cults: Christianity on *The Leftovers*

The "Two Boats and a Helicopter" episode focuses on Reverend Matt Jamison and his terrible, horrible, very bad day in which his faith is stretched to the brink. "Two Boats and a Helicopter" has an ostensibly simple episodic plot: Matt needs to amass $135,000 to meet another's bid to own his church. He has a small percentage of the sum stored in cash in the Garvey's backyard—a donation resulting from his revealing the sins of a corrupt judge while Kevin's father was the sheriff. He takes the cash to the local Native American casino. Once there, Matt pays particular attention to a single bird that has made its way into the building and lands on the roulette table; he takes the presence of this bird as a divine sign. He bets his sum on red and wins multiple times in a row to get enough money to meet the bid on the church. He attracts the attention of two other betters who then attempt to rob him of the winnings. He ends up beating one of them severely, revealing both his desperation and his simmering anger. Throughout the episode, he encounters various additional hurdles between him and the bank's deadline. The ultimate impediment involves his stopping to aid an injured member of the Guilty Remnant. When he stops, his assailant knocks Matt unconscious. Matt wakes from unconsciousness seemingly getting to the bank within minutes of the deadline, until the bank

manager tells him that he has been unconscious for more than a day and that the church was sold in the interim. The final ironic—or perhaps fateful—twist is that the Guilty Remnant bought the church and had already started painting over the stained glass and removing the Christian elements.

Matt's faith was tested with this experience but not broken. After the loss of the church, he continues to act as he feels his vocation requires: he is spiritual guide to the handful of residents who still turn to Christianity to provide solace and sense of purpose in a world that has seemingly turned to nihilism. Even more than that, Matt focuses even more on trying to help—as he sees it—the Guilty Remnant. Matt plays the holy fool, seeing religious meaning in bad luck. His optimism is represented as antithetical to reality. Similarly, religious representation in a show without containment is constructed as oppositional to quality realist representation and prevailing industry ideologies.

The second season, which many critics have praised as a leap in quality from the first, moved the Garveys from Mapleton, NY to Miracle, TX.[65] As the town's name implies, the small community is deeply imbued with religious faith as it is heralded as the only town not to experience any departures. Matt Jamison moved there, the Garveys follow, and a new family, the Murphys, are added to the character roll as natives of Miracle (formerly Jarden), Texas. The season's marked rise in attributions of quality result from a variety of causes, including moving beyond the weighty world-building of the first season as well as displaying a clearer idea of characters. These elements infuse new life into the series along with the new family, and presenting a new mystery. The show also has placed questions of faith more explicitly at the center of the series. Miracle is a town of religions, mostly Christian; residents attribute the eponymous miracle to this circumstance. Thus, the town markets itself as miraculous. It's a

national park, a tourist trap, and a place where broken people arrive seeking healing. The way Christianity is portrayed in this second season as something unique and interesting, but not necessarily normal, mirrors the show's move to Texas; it is borrowing from the Southern realist mode of religious representation and its geographical displacement of religion onto Southern culture. This motif develops even as the exploration of the Sudden Departure and subsequent possible-departure of three girls from Miracle becomes more and more mystical and fantastic. The first season established *The Leftovers*' quality containment strategies – strategies that the show implemented further using the second season's incorporation of Southern realism. That process of containment, in turn, allowed the show to pay more attention to religious representation beyond its displacement onto cults or naïve believers (i.e., Matt). This increased attention to religion included using its fantastic genre elements to explore religion representationally as mystical and metaphysical, not "realistically" atavistic.

CONCLUSION

The three case studies examined in this chapter provide a different set of responses to the fear of being categorized as preachy than those elicited by the quality realist dramas addressed in the last chapter. Fear of preachiness during the 2000s led to an unwritten and assumed production code of avoiding discussing religion-qua-religion unless it is safely contained—for both the text and the creatives—via a combination of quality and fantastic genre conventions. Strategies of displacement among realist quality dramas' creatives discussed in the previous chapter persist, but instead of geographic displacement, religion becomes displaced generically in the fantastic. Additionally, such generic displacement allows for the discursive abstraction of religion into spirituality in creatives' discussions of the shows. Unlike in Southern realist dramas, religion is no longer othered, but neither is it overtly a representation of traditional religion. The specifics of

Christianity are buried in the abstraction to spirituality, protecting creatives and their work from being perceived as religious and thus in line with the preachy middlebrow religious dramas discussed in chapter one. However, the abstraction is only possible because the quality elements of these shows allows them to engage religiousness, as these shows' realist brethren in chapter two do. When quality is not part of the fantastic drama's discourse, as will be analyzed in the following two chapters, abstraction isn't enough; religiousness must be denied to protect the fantastic shows' creatives.

Battlestar Galactica, Lost, and *The Leftovers* represent a spectrum of how religion has been presented and discussed in post-network era quality fantastic television. Even if only depicted as abstracted spirituality, these shows work in such a way as to maintain religion's function, rather than reducing it to areligious mythology, as non-quality fantastic dramas do. This spectrum of religious representation can be summarized as follows. Religious representation in quality fantastic dramas can be vaguely spiritual – but that takes a few seasons to explore, as was the case in *Lost*. It can clearly be explored – but only within the benefits of more niche-oriented cable outlets, during moments of transition in executive oversight, or through highly unreal premises, as was the case with *Battlestar Galactica*. Or it might combine elements of these two strategies, while minimizing its fantastic elements in favor of quality notions, as was true with *The Leftovers*. In spite of these variations, all of these shows share the protection of quality discursive designations and fantastic genre conventions. Such conventions help make religion acceptable to their target upscale and fan audiences. Additionally, these genre expectations and quality designations aid in sustaining legacy practices of containment among the writers of the shows. Religion was and remains displaced, abstracted, or minimized in creatives' discussion of it throughout the span of these series, from 2003 to 2016, to ensure that the writers and creatives

working on these shows aren't assumed to be religious themselves. The creatives working on these shows, even in the context of the shift toward more open discussions of religion and edgy presentations of it in 2015, remain hugely influenced by the legacies that shaped much of the boom's discourse. They can discuss religion as spirituality, one non-institutional way to tackle the "big questions" within the safety of fantastic generic displacement of the real. Without these protections for texts and creatives, religion loses its religiousness; it is no longer even an avenue to tackle the "big questions," as will be explored in the next chapter.

---

[1] Catherine Johnson, *Telefantasy* (British Film Institute, 2005), 7.
[2] Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures*, (New York: Routledge, 2002), 43.
[3] Jan Johnson-Smith, *American Science Fiction* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2005); M. Keith Booker, *Science Fiction Television* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004).
[4] Heather Hendershot, "'You Know How It Is with Nuns . . . ' Religion and Television's Sacred/Secular Fetuses," in *Small Screen, Big Picture: Television and Lived Religion*, ed. Diane Winston (Baylor University Press, 2009), 205-206.
[5] This "spirituality" is related to Ursula King's feminist use of the term instead of religion as a way of distancing religiousness from the traditional and patriarchal connotations associated with "religion" as a concept, but among creatives it is an unacknowledged and non-political dissociation, unlike King. For more on feminist use of "spirituality" instead of "religion" see: Ursula King, *Women and Spirituality: Voices of Protest and Promise*, 2nd ed., (London: Macmillan, 1993).
[6] *The Leftovers* had more leeway to introduce these visuals in the first season likely due to a few reasons such as: airing a decade after *Lost* and *Battlestar Galactica*; using the visuals in the opening credits, not marketing materials; and HBO's position as an always already upscale/non-middlebrow premium channel.
[7] John T. Caldwell, *Televisuality: Style, Crisis, and Authority in American Television* (Rutgers University Press, 1995); Michael Z. Newman and Elana Levine, *Legitimating Television* (New York: Routledge, 2011).
[8] Derek Kompare, "'More 'Moments of Television": Online Cult Television Authorship," in *Flow TV: Television in the Age of Media Convergence*, ed. Michael Kackman et al. (Routledge, 2010).
[9] Matt Fowler, "Syfy Looking to Get Back to Battlestar Galactica-Quality Sci-Fi," *IGN*, October 30, 2014, http://www.ign.com/articles/2014/10/30/syfy-looking-to-get-back-to-battlestar-galactica-quality-sci-fi; Michael Kackman, "Flow Favorites: Quality Television, Melodrama, and Cultural Complexity Michael Kackman / University of Texas – Austin – Flow," accessed April 5, 2016, http://www.flowjournal.org/2010/03/flow-favorites-quality-television-melodrama-and-cultural-complexity-michael-kackman-university-of-texas-austin/; "Networking Families: Battlestar Galactica and the Values of Quality Jordan Lavender-Smith / City University of New

York – Flow," accessed April 5, 2016, http://www.flowjournal.org/2009/12/networking-families-battlestar-galactica-and-the-values-of-quality-jordan-lavender-smith-city-university-of-new-york/; Cory Barker, "Sophomore Jump: How The Leftovers Became the Best Show on TV," *TV.com*, December 3, 2015, http://www.tv.com/shows/the-leftovers/community/post/the-leftovers-season-2-improvement-144907112784/.

[10] Catherine Johnson, *Telefantasy*, (BFI, 2005), 4.

[11] Winston, Diane, "Introduction," in *Small Screen, Big Picture: Television and Lived Religion*, ed. Diane Winston (Baylor University Press, 2009), 1.

[12] Barbara Selznick, "Branding the Future: Syfy in the Post-Network Era," *Science Fiction Film and Television* 2, no. 2 (2009): 189.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Leslie Gornstein, "Is Scorsese's HBO Show the Most Expensive Ever?," *E! Online*, January 19, 2010, http://www.eonline.com/news/162826/is-scorsese-s-hbo-show-the-most-expensive-ever.

[16] Michael Z. Newman and Elana Levine, *Legitimating Television* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 42. See also Kompare, "More Moments" and Denise Mann, "It's Not TV, It's Brand Management," in *Production Studies: Cultural Studies of Media Industries*, ed. Vicki Mayer, Miranda J. Banks, and John T. Caldwell (Routledge, 2009).

[17] It's worth noting that at this time, ABC's executives face overhaul at the top, and the new president of the network was able to take credit for *Lost* and *Desperate Housewives*, even though they were developed by his predecessor. This helped to perpetuate the discourse of ABC as a place for fresh ideas and risks in 2004.

[18] Robert Bianco, "A Good Season, with Reason," *USAToday.com*, April 27, 2005, http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/life/television/news/2005-04-26-tv-lookback_x.htm.

[19] Lynn Schofield Clark, "You Lost Me: Mystery, Fandom, and Religion in ABC's *Lost*," in *Small Screen, Big Picture: Television and Lived Religion*, ed. Diane Winston (Baylor University Press, 2009), 323.

[20] Maureen Ryan, "'Battlestar Galactica' and 'Lost': The Similarities Are Spooky - The Watcher," *Chicago Tribune*, June 9, 2008, http://featuresblogs.chicagotribune.com/entertainment_tv/2008/06/battlestar-gala.html.

[21] Michael Hinman, "So Tell Us Honestly, Is There Too Much Religion In Sci-Fi? | Airlock Alpha," October 20, 2010, http://www.airlockalpha.com/node/7952/so-tell-us-honestly-is-there-too-much-religion-in-sci-fi.html; Tiffany Vogt, "TV Watchtower: Is Religion Killing Good Sci-Fi Shows? | Airlock Alpha," October 19, 2010, http://airlockalpha.com/node/7945/tv-watchtower-is-religion-killing-good-sci-fi-shows.html; Graeme McMillan, "God Stopped My Show Being Advertised, Says Kings Creator," May 17, 2009, http://io9.com/5255165/god-stopped-my-show-being-advertised-says-kings-creator.

[22] Deborah L. Jaramillo, "The Family Racket: AOL Time Warner, HBO, *The Sopranos*, and the Construction of a Quality Brand," *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 26, no. 1 (January 1, 2002): 59–75.

[23] Marisa Guthrie, "HBO Not 'Hung' Up on Decision-Making," *Broadcasting & Cable* 139, no. 23 (June 8, 2009): 34–34.

[24] Lacey Rose, "FX Chief: 'HBO and FX Absolutely Dominated the Race for Quality in Television,'" *The Hollywood Reporter*, January 18, 2015,

http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/live-feed/fx-chief-hbo-fx-absolutely-764581; Tim Appelo, "Emmys: How AMC Became HBO's Nightmare," *The Hollywood Reporter*, June 18, 2011, http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/emmys-how-amc-became-hbos-203084.

[25] Todd Spangler, "As Netflix Rises, Subscriptions to HBO, Showtime and Other Premium Nets Shrink as Percentage of U.S. Households: Report," *Variety*, January 20, 2014, http://variety.com/2014/digital/news/as-netflix-rises-more-people-are-canceling-hbo-and-showtime-1201065399/.

[26] "*Battlestar Galactica*," *Peabody Awards*, accessed April 11, 2016, http://www.peabodyawards.com/award-profile/battlestar-galactica; James Hibberd, "Syfy Plans to Lure You Back with These 5 Shows," *Entertainment Weekly's EW.com*, October 28, 2014, http://www.ew.com/article/2014/10/28/syfy; Richard Vine, "Better than The Wire?," *The Guardian*, March 18, 2009, sec. Television & radio, http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2009/mar/19/battlestar-galactica-review.

[27] Ronald D. Moore, telephone interview, March 6, 2015.

[28] Moore interview; Bradely Thompson, telephone interview, January 31, 2015.

[29] For more on firsts and industrial ideological change see: Todd Gitlin, "Prime Time Ideology: The Hegemonic Process of Television Entertainment," in *Television: The Critical View,* ed. Horace Newcomb (New York : Oxford University Press, 2000).

[30] Thompson interview.

[31] Ibid.

[32] "*The Shield*," *Peabody Awards*, accessed April 11, 2016, http://www.peabodyawards.com/award-profile/the-shield.

[33] Deborah L. Jaramillo, "AMC Stumbling toward a New Television Canon," *Television & New Media* 14, no. 2 (March 1, 2013): 167–83, doi:10.1177/1527476412442105.

[34] Thompson interview.

[35] Chris Klassen, "Research Note: Rejecting Monotheism? Polytheism, Pluralism, and Battlestar Galactic," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 23, no. 3 (October 2008): 359.

[36] A tradition of literacy required by quality goes back to the 1950s and 1970s iterations of quality television. See: Kirsten Marthe Lentz, "Quality Versus Relevance: Feminism, Race, And The Politics Of The Sign In 1970S Television.," *Camera Obscura* 15, no. 1 (2000): 44–93.

[37] Matthew Wooding Stover, "The Gods Suck," in *So Say We All: An Unauthorized Collection of Thoughts and Opinions on Battlestar Galactica*, ed. Richard Hatch (Dallas TX: BonBella Books, 2006), 31.

[38] Thompson interview.

[39] Jason Mittell, "Forensic Fandom and the Drillable Text," *Spreadable Media*, accessed December 6, 2015, http://spreadablemedia.org/essays/mittell/.

[40] Damon Lindelof, personal interview, June 7, 2015.

[41] Ibid.

[42] Ibid.

[43] Ibid.

[44] Gregg Nations, telephone interview, April 24, 2015.

[45] Ibid.

[46] Lindelof interview.

[47] Ibid.

[48] Bianco, "A Good Season."

[49] Of course, Lindelof and Nations might have been painting a rosier picture of the network that was reality since both are still working in the industry, but Lindelof, at least, by virtue of his persona and success with HBO/clout within the industry seems to have little reason to fear.
[50] Lindelof interview
[51] For example: Tiffany Vogt, "TV Watchtower: Is Religion Killing Good Sci-Fi Shows? | Airlock Alpha," October 19, 2010, http://airlockalpha.com/node/7945/tv-watchtower-is-religion-killing-good-sci-fi-shows.html.
[52] Mark Shanahan, "Adaptation: Tom Perrotta Is Growing Accustomed to Seeing His Books on the Big Screen," *Boston.com*, October 18, 2006, http://archive.boston.com/news/globe/living/articles/2006/10/18/adaptation/.
[53] Damon Lindelof, personal interview, June 7, 2015.
[54] Ibid.
[55] Ibid.
[56] Ibid.
[57] "Pilot," *The Leftovers.*
[58] Ibid.
[59] Joanna Robinson, "How the Emotionally Satisfying *Leftovers* Finale Learned from the Mistakes of *Lost*," *Vanity Fair*, December 7, 2015, http://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2015/12/leftovers-finale-damon-lindelof-lost; "From 'Lost' To 'Leftovers', Show Creators Embrace Ambiguity And The Unknown," *NPR.org*, accessed April 12, 2016, http://www.npr.org/2015/12/02/458143133/from-lost-to-leftovers-show-creators-embrace-ambiguity-and-the-unknown.
[60] Alan Sepinwall, "Review: 'The Leftovers' Is Still TV's Best Drama as Season 2 Begins," *HitFix*, September 30, 2015, http://www.hitfix.com/whats-alan-watching/review-the-leftovers-is-still-tvs-best-drama-as-season-2-begins.
[61] There will be three seasons of *The Leftovers*, but as of this writing, only two have aired.
[62] Daniel McDermon, "'The Leftovers' Recap: What Happened to Gladys," *ArtsBeat*, 1406541640, http://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/07/28/the-leftovers-recap-what-happened-to-gladys/.
[63] "The Prodigal Son Returns," *The Leftovers*.
[64] Tsvetan Todorov, "The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre," in *Fantastic Literature: A Critical Reader.* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004), 136.
[65] Cory Barker, "Sophomore Jump: How The Leftovers Became the Best Show on TV," *TV.com*, December 3, 2015, http://www.tv.com/shows/the-leftovers/community/post/the-leftovers-season-2-improvement-144907112784/.

Chapter Four Religion as Mythology: Eschatological Fantastic Dramas

THE POST-CHRISTIAN END OF THE WORLD

Eschatological fantastic dramas, as I have categorized them, form a grouping of shows whose narratives draw upon the Biblical apocalypse from the New Testament's Book of Revelation. However, within a post-Christian production context, their biblical literalism is classified as non-religious, an unacknowledged pastiche of its religious origins. Religion becomes merely "supernatural," a word often used by industry practitioners to describe the full range of fantastic elements from monsters and magic to angels and the Devil himself. The characters and narratives from Revelation are discussed as mythology by the creatives working on these shows. This post-Christian denial of religion – while still using Christian motifs such as the Devil raising hell on earth, warring angels, and the Biblical end of the world – allows for large-scale narrative stakes and a clear narrative endgame: the end of the world. *Supernatural* (WB/CW, 2005-), *Dominion* (SyFy, 2014-2015), and *Sleepy Hollow* (Fox, 2013-) are exemplars of this category. There are few examples of series that fit this grouping, but outside of these three case studies, examples include *The Messengers* (CW, 2015) and (vaguely, with more focus on the antichrist than Revelation) *Damien* (A&E, 2016-). Eschatological fantastic shows contrast with the shows analyzed in the previous chapter because the former series are not considered quality dramas by viewers, critics, creatives, or scholars; rather, they are positioned by industry stakeholders as well as largely understood by critics and viewers as genre shows, cult hits, or guilty pleasures. They represent a different kind of upscale audience imaginary than quality series such as *Lost* and *The Leftovers*, but they and their target audiences are also constructed as oppositional to religion.[1] As a result, these three shows and their grouping within the category of

eschatological fantasy, along with *The Messengers,* lead their writers to be even less inclined to acknowledge their work as religious.

Eschatological fantastic dramas simultaneously literally represent stories and characters from the Bible while their writers deny that such stories or characters are religious. Representationally, they are among the most overtly religious, but among writers and producers involved with them, that religion is characterized as non-religious mythology – in other words, emptied of religious meanings. These shows exemplify the postmodern, post-Christian sensibility within mainstream, prime-time dramas that use representations of religion as blank parody or pastiche removed from their religious meanings. Writers call this pastiche mythology, because to recognize the blank parody implies that they acknowledge the potential religiousness of these Biblical narratives. The case studies presented herein serve as the most extreme examples of this post-Christian sensibility and the paradox between increased religious representation and the persistent resistance to acknowledge religion by writers creating those representations.

APOCALYPTIC LITERATURE

Christian visions of the end of the world as presented in the Book of Revelation long have been primary scripture of Christian theology and of interest to religious studies scholarship.[2] Eschatology is a term abiding in theology and in the academy. It is not used much in the wider culture, unlike "apocalypse," which has become shorthand for catastrophe, as for example in non-eschatological fantastic series like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (WB/UPN 1997-2003) and its spinoff *Angel* (WB, 1999-2004).[3] In his study of apocalyptic themes in film, Jon R. Stone notes the conundrum of using a language that still invokes the particularly religious

aspects of apocalypse when it has generally lost its specific and powerful religious meanings. He writes:

> It has become commonplace to speak of any cataclysmic event as an "apocalypse" or as "apocalyptic." Such collegial misuse of these potent terms, though widespread, stems from a conceptual and definitional misunderstanding. By definition, apocalypses are revelatory texts whose sources of knowledge are otherworldly or divine. As such, an apocalypse reveals a reality not previously known to the prophet, the recipient of the revelation, or to its intended audience. As a literary genre, an apocalypse has two common elements: its revelatory narrative framework and its eschatological orientation, an orientation that anticipates final judgment and punishment of the wicked.[4]

In general, the series in this chapter do not focus on the revelatory framework; even *The Messengers,* which focused on delivering the message of the apocalypse, did not focus on the element of prophecy. They may have prophets—*Supernatural* has had two since its fourth season—but their stories are not primarily about the prophecy nor about those who hear it and repeat it. Instead, the focus of the series examined in this chapter is the eschatological battle itself, the war between good (the hero-protagonists of the series) and evil (the Devil; high-ranking demons and the legions of Hell; resentful angels abandoned by God and looking to destroy the world in a kind of pseudo-tantrum for attention).

Eschatological fantastic dramas use an abstracted version of the Biblical apocalypse presented in Revelation, culturally familiar beyond Christian adherents. In their study of the apocalypse on film, scholars Karen A. Ritzenhoff and Angela Krewani explain the basics of the Biblical apocalypse and its reduction in secular culture:

> In the strict religious sense, the apocalypse consists of three elements: first the sinners on earth and then the resurrection of Christ with the Final Judgment, separating earth's people into the good and the bad. After this, the third element comes into being: the building of the New Jerusalem, Christ's realm on earth. In the course of the narrative and due to secularization, the narrative of the apocalypse has changed from being a threefold story to a twofold story: the sinful mankind and its destruction as God's punishment.[5]

In eschatological fantastic dramas, the end of the world is structured around this basic interpretation of Book of Revelation from the New Testament. However, they avoid any sense of judgment at the end of the world. Judgment is the overarching narrative threat; the tribulations that precede it are the foundation of these shows' premises. The characters in eschatological fantastic dramas are in the middle of the fight and do not care about the possibility of justice or punishment in the afterlife. Even in series that do represent Heaven and/or Hell as real locations where characters have gone, the focus remains on the terrestrial battle and the active experience of trying to stop the end from actually occurring, or at least delay it a few more millennia. In theological terms, these shows follow a premillennial view of Christian eschatology that expresses the view that the world is getting worse as it progresses toward the ultimate apocalyptic end that heralds Christ's return and defeat of Satan.[6] What is distinctive about these shows, however, is that they take that story foundation and then claim it as non-religious mythology. This post-Christian eschatological context further asserts that the angels fighting in these apocalyptic tribulations are not religious figures.

Apocalyptic Angels as Transtheistic and as Pastiche

For *Supernatural* and *Dominion,* angels are central agents of this eschatological battle, and in secular iterations of the Book of Revelation, the same is true. Religious scholar Peter Gardella writes:

> In apocalyptic writing, angels often take on strange and possibly symbolic forms . . . Such forms are suitable to myth, and apocalyptic literature uses all of the elements of myth, such as battles that include the stars and the sea, great monsters, and mountains. The Christian book of Revelation (sometimes called Apocalypse) which came out of the first persecutions of Christians by Rome, abounds in angels performing cosmic acts that believers have spent centuries interpreting . . . No book of the Bible contains more angelic activity and more angels acting on a cosmic scale than the twenty-two chapters of Revelation.[7]

Gardella studies angels both in their theological context and in their American mytho-cultural context, theorizing contemporary understanding of angels as "transtheistic."[8] Gardella uses this term to situate angels within a culture beyond Christianity alone without losing their religious significance. His study of angels, however, is strongly tied to American Christian culture even if it extends beyond it. Gardella's study of angels helps to situate eschatological fantastic dramas in relationship to apocalyptic literature and studies of angels within that context. The eschatological fantastic dramas of this chapter, however, represent angels in their traditional Christian mode of representation in the apocalypse, acting on a cosmic scale in service to the Christian eschatological story. The Christian narrative interpretation of angels is only possible due to the post-Christian denial of angels and the Book of Revelation's religiousness. In contemporary fantastic eschatological dramas, angels are merely mythological narrative figures. They exist in

narrative worlds in which the Book of Revelation is understood by creatives as a non-religious cultural myth, familiar to American audiences, whether they are Christian or not.

Due to their non-religious mythological characterization among prime-time television writers, in the post-network era, angels are flexible character types in religious apocalyptic fantasy stories, frequently becoming supernatural heroes and villains. They have become a postmodern pastiche of their religious iteration. Gone are the benign, inherently good angels like those in *Touched by an Angel*. The angels of the post-network era are as complex and flawed as their human counterparts. They may fight on either side of the apocalyptic war, although they often are antagonists for the human characters rather than "guardian" angels. The reinterpretation of angels as antagonists helps to further dissociate these programs from *Touched by an Angel* as the paragon of religious dramas.

In fact, the angels in eschatological fantastic dramas align more closely with the fallen angel, Lucifer, in direct—and likely purposeful--contrast to the guardian angels of "preachy" dramas. Gardella describes "a central aspect of Christian tradition: the idea of war in Heaven between angels. Most Christian thinkers over the past 2,000 years have traced the existence and power of evil in the world to the rebellion of Lucifer and the other angels who joined them."[9] Many of the angels in eschatological fantastic dramas serve Lucifer or act as his replacement as an angelic adversary. But, as noted above, this war among angels is situated within a postmodern pastiche of the Christian apocalypse. Angels, too, occupy the paradoxical representative space of non-religious Biblical literalism. As Regina M. Hansen argues, "*Supernatural's* interpretation of the angels of scripture itself selectively privileges narrative over free will, leading in some cases to a fundamentalist of literal representation of biblical themes and characters, and overlooking theological complexities."[10] The post-Christian sensibility creates this paradox through the

simultaneous denial and use of Christianity and its motifs. Part of the post-Christian sensibility that transforms religion into mythology subsumes religious representation into media logic.[11]

Along with angels and Lucifer, the humans who are caught in the prophetic battle of the apocalypse are the main characters of the eschatological fantastic programs. They drive the plot but only within the bounds of a world perpetually on the brink of its end. As much as they rely on the Christian Book of Revelation, the writers and executives working on the shows discussed in this chapter do not consider their shows religious. This denial of religion is both a cultural sensibility and an industrial construction resulting from legacy practices, genre expectations, and assumptions by creatives about the fans they are targeting. After the 1990s preachy religious series, not even Revelation can be acknowledged as religious without the protection of abstraction, denial, or containment in the post-Christian sensibility.

Each case study in this chapter supports its main claim of continuity of both religious representation and writers' and producers' characterization of that representation as non-religious mythology. Across network, netlet, and niche cable outlets, the representation of the Biblical apocalypse remains a potentially valuable premise as long as creatives' deny its religiousness. This holds true from 2005 to 2015. Moreover, these case studies are the only case studies whose writers requested anonymity for interviews, indicating the continued sense of risk—even when religion is denied—felt among prime-time television writers. The discomfort was especially evident for those in precarious staff writing positions on network dramas because they are potentially closest to the middlebrow audience and its association with religion and thus require more distancing and denial of religion as they represent what could be called Biblical literalism.

CONTAINMENT THROUGH PASTICHE: *SUPERNATURAL*

Supernatural is a drama about two brothers fighting monsters, angels, and demons to prevent the apocalypse and keep humanity safe. It began airing on the WB in 2005, at the same time that both *Lost* and *Battlestar Galactica* were significant cultural and industrial successes. It continued on the netlet after the WB merged with UPN to form the CW in 2007 and still airs there. However, *Supernatural'*s place in the cultural and industrial landscape was much smaller; perhaps its more marginal cultural status at a low-culture, teen-oriented channel, the WB/CW, protected it from religious backlash and scrutiny. Notably, *Supernatural*'s early seasons overlapped briefly with the final seasons of *7th Heaven* on the WB, setting the fantastic drama's religious representation in stark contrast to that of its preachy network sibling. The former got a pass because it was of the fantastic genres and thus about mythology, not religion; the latter persisted among creatives as an example of why to avoid religion.

Supernatural, despite its low but consistent ratings in its first seasons, added value to the WB and the CW (the WB's incarnation after a 2007 merger with UPN) as a product of Warner Bros. Television. Much of its survival was based on its position within Warner Bros. and the WB/CW's vertically integrated business structure. *Supernatural*'s ratings could be low or average, but their consistency and the show's strong youth and female audiences helped it survive.[12] This was the case even as it was often paired with the relatively male-skewing Superman drama, *Smallville* (WB/CW 2001-2011) for much of the late-2000s. This pairing represented the netlet's effort to attract more male viewers to its more heavily female-skewing network.[13] Eventually, *Supernatural* became the anchor of the CW's programming and Warner Bros.' alternative revenue strategies, exemplified by its 2011 (relatively early for streaming) Netflix licensing agreement.[14] In terms of genre and brand, it helped push the network toward more supernatural and fantastic genre-based programming like *The Vampire Diaries* (CW,

2009-) and its current lead-in, *Arrow* (CW, 2012-). *Supernatural* is by far the longest-running series among the case studies in this dissertation. Its marginal status in the mid-2000s kept its potentially groundbreaking/blasphemous approach to religious representation largely under the radar outside of its fan audience, which included critics and scholars. *Supernatural*'s perpetual position "on the bubble" of even a small netlet allowed for it to take a chance on more risky and overt religious representation because each season could be its last. And instead of isolating its target audience of upscale fantastic genre fans, *Supernatural*'s religious narrative was embraced by its consistent viewer base. Moreover, it serves as the paragon of what I call eschatological fantastic dramas for how it uses its fantastic genre to claim the Bible as a source for non-religious mythology.

Supernatural began with a fairly simple premise: two brothers travel the country by car and fight monsters and demons. The Winchester brothers, Sam (Jared Padalecki) and Dean (Jensen Ackles), grew up knowing that the things that go bump in the night were real. Their mother was killed by a demon in Sam's nursery when Sam was still a baby and Dean only 4 years old. After that, their father (Jeffrey Dean Morgan) became itinerant in his quest for vengeance, traveling across the country in his classic Chevrolet Impala with his two sons, learning how to hunt the monsters that he knew were responsible for his wife's death. This background is established in the first five minutes of the pilot before jumping to Dean and Sam in their 20s and establishing their disparate approaches to their family tradition of hunting monsters: Dean continues to hunt with their father, seeking to emulate him, and Sam seeks to leave both hunting and his family behind. When Sam's girlfriend is killed in the same way his mother was, Sam joins Dean on the hunt. Although the basic premise of brothers hunting evil things is the basis of the show, the overarching religious narrative first appeared in the fourth

episode of the series, “Phantom Traveler.” That episode marks the first demon that the brothers must fight, and it hints at a wider world of the hunt that includes heavenly and infernal players. By the ninth episode of the series, “Home,” the show had already begun to rewrite the establishing events of the pilot through the brothers revisiting their childhood home and acknowledging that Sam has some heretofore unknown psychic abilities, abilities that would be revealed as a result of ingesting demon blood. In that episode, the Winchester brothers encounter the ghost of their mother who enigmatically apologizes to Sam.

Over the first five seasons of *Supernatural*, the narrative that Sam and Dean are part of a larger Biblical story that includes the two men discovering the following: that their exploits, in the form of the “Winchester Gospel,” have been recorded by a prophet as a young adult novel series; that God is absent; that angels are real and as amoral as demons; and that the brothers are prophesied to be the vessels for Lucifer (Mark Pellegrino) and the archangel Michael in the final apocalyptic battle that will destroy the earth. All of these eschatological discoveries flow from one essential explanation of their mother’s apology in “Home,” revealed in the fourth season episode, “Sympathy for the Devil”: She made a deal with a demon that allowed him to establish an influence on Sam in order to prepare him to be Lucifer’s vessel.[15]

Within this five-season Biblical apocalypse narrative on *Supernatural*, the main characters call angels “dicks,” find Heaven to be emotionally torturous, and say "screw him" when they find God absent. Eschatological fantastic shows such as *Supernatural*, as well as *Sleepy Hollow* and *Dominion*, operate in a post-Christian sensibility in which Christian elements such as angels, God, and the Devil are subservient to the storytelling in a way that removes their religiousness. These religious representational elements have become mere pastiche versions of religious figures, stories, and tropes: blank parodies emptied of their meaning.[16] Eric Kripke, the

creator and showrunner during *Supernatural*'s first five seasons, often described the show in post-Christian terms.[17] For example in an interview with television critic, Maureen Ryan, he said:

> If I had a worldview, and I don't know if I do, but if I did, it's one that's intensely humanistic. [That worldview] is that the only thing that matters is family and personal connection, and that's the only thing that gives life meaning. Religion and gods and beliefs—for me, it all comes down to your brother. And your brother might be the brother in your family, or it might be the guy next to you in the foxhole—it's about human connections. What you'll find as the mythology of [Season 5] unveils, it's this massive, Byzantine mythology of angels and demons and what they want and their destinies for the world. But it's basically about two red-blooded, human brothers giving them all the middle finger and saying, basically, "Screw you; it's our planet. If you want to have a war, pick another one."[18]

This explanation articulates the propensity of creatives on non-quality fantastic shows to diminish the religious power of religious characters and stories. In doing so, writers of fantastic dramas can use them freely for their own purposes without fear of being perceived as religious, let alone blasphemous. "Religion and gods and beliefs" become "Byzantine mythology" even during the course of a single interview quote. The containment of religion in the term mythology further illustrates the potential for cultural critique, if only at an angle, that such post-Christian religious representation and production practices of containment can allow because creatives and executives have disavowed their shows' religiousness. Kripke explicitly framed the Christian tropes and figures in his show as hollow mythology in this quote and other interviews, including a recent oral history of the show in honor of its two hundredth episode.[19] However, the overall

religious narrative can be read as largely anti-religious.[20] The series questions – and often challenges – a host of theologies, and as Kripke says, "gives them the middle finger." Such blatant criticism of religion is only possible when the religiousness of such figures and the systems they arise out of has been contained both within the show and among its writers and producers, in effect transformed to the point of pastiche. When these fantastic eschatological shows no longer represent religion, critique becomes blank parody instead of blasphemy.

Supernatural is a model of eschatological fantastic dramas via its denial of its overt religious representation. In many ways it set the pattern for religious representations in this category—by virtue of being the first and most successful in cultivating its fan audience—and utilized strategies that other shows' creatives, *Sleepy Hollow* especially, repeated in order to distance its mythology from any sense of religiousness. Its representation of explicitly Christian figures, tropes, and narratives was unparalleled in its Biblical literalism by the fifth season. However, *Supernatural*'s fantastic generic context, its industrial position within the marginal netlet, its cult fan audience, and its creators' insistence that the show was not religious allowed its religious representation to be accepted as mythology, a pastiche of religion. However, the show did not make this Biblical apocalyptic arc explicit in the first two seasons. Like *Lost*, in its early seasons, *Supernatural* hesitated in revealing its central religious narrative as central to a season- or seasons-long plot; instead it hinted at it through the acknowledgement of demons and hell through one-off episodic stories.

Supernatural did feature monsters and foes of explicitly non-Christian origin, especially in the first two seasons. In addition to traditional horror monsters like ghosts and vampires, the first season featured episodes with Native American skinwalker and wendigo myths. *Supernatural* writers used this strategy to mitigate the Christian representational frame created

by the focus on demons and the eventual eschatological narrative. Writers point to the use of other belief systems for one-episode adversaries as proof that their shows aren't religious and to buttress their claims of Christian tropes as merely part of a tapestry of American mythology.[21] But monsters from other belief systems do not minimize a Christian apocalyptic narrative.

Despite building the show's ongoing narrative around a patently Christian frame, the producers and writers on *Supernatural* still distance themselves from religiousness in their discussions of the work. As one writer for *Supernatural* who joined the room in the show's later seasons told me, "It does seem that there was an organic process [to writing] that resulted in deeper explorations of religious subject matter—that it wasn't necessarily part of the original plan for the show but the deeper they got into demonology the more appealing and/or necessary it became to introduce demons' opposites."[22] This writer is one of the few throughout this study that used the term religious when referring to religious representation, acknowledging the religious grounding of demons and angels. This may be because they were granted anonymity or more likely because they were not involved in that "organic process" having only recently joined the writing staff. The "it does seem" provides distancing from the sense of religiousness that the discursive denial of religion does for other creatives. Although this writer says angels were introduced as demon's opposites, *Supernatural* is notable for being the first among these shows to configure angels as equally complicit in a plan to end the world. Furthermore, the writer's positioning of religious subject matter as an eventual necessity once again illustrates the hesitation on display. Creatives engaged in the type of self-policing discussed in the previous chapter. The slow burn toward the religious narrative arc, by, for example, only introducing angels in the fourth season highlights the continued sense of potential regarding religious narratives, especially those that feature angels because of their association with the preachy

Touched by an Angel, even as the show made very clear that angels, demons, etc. existed within the same non-religious representational field as vampires, ghosts, and Native American skin-walkers.

Despite the increase in religious representation in television dramas since 2003 for which *Supernatural* stands as an explicit example, the logic of risk within writers' rooms persists, even when religious representation is couched in post-Christian characterization of religion as mythology and pastiche. This cautiousness is built on years of ideological learning as writers honed their skills both watching television and working in writers' rooms and at networks where religion was understood as risky. Until *Battlestar Galactica,* there was no well-known, let alone well-regarded, series that used religion as one of its key thematic and narrative concerns without being considered preachy or stymied narratively. Thus, it became imperative within the ideology that shaped *Supernatural*, as well as so many other shows of this time period, that creatives framed Christian narrative tropes through post-Christian denial.

CONTAINMENT THROUGH DENIAL*: DOMINION*

Dominion aired for two seasons on Syfy (formerly The Sci Fi Channel) from 2014 to 2015. Syfy at the time was undergoing a brand identity crisis, its second since 2009 as the channel tried to navigate its post-*Battlestar Galactica* landscape. The first brand identity crisis occurred in 2009 – the same year that early 2000s tent-pole *Battlestar Galactica* ended – when the Sci Fi Channel announced that it was changing its name to Syfy in an effort to expand its output (and hopefully its viewer base).[23] Whereas throughout the 2000s, Sci Fi focused on shows such as *Battlestar Galactica, Andromeda* (2000-2005) and *Stargate: Atlantis* (2004-2009) that were overtly science fictional and niche, the rebranded Syfy found success with lighter, more broadly fantastic programming such as *Warehouse 13* (2009-2014), *Eureka* (2006-2012), and the

reality show *Ghost Hunters* (2004-). The movement away from science fiction and toward more fantasy, horror, and broadly fantastic programming underlined the name change in ways that alienated the science fiction fan audience that had supported Sci Fi and *Battlestar Galactica*.[24] Unfortunately, none of these newer shows recreated the critical success of *Battlestar Galactica* (2003-2009).[25] In 2014, Syfy began a new public relations campaign, called by some a de-rebranding, to court the "quality" science-fiction audience they lost when they had shifted to more lighthearted series from 2009-2014.[26] In a 2014 article, *Entertainment Weekly* reporter Bill Hibbard explained Syfy's latest brand shift with shows such as *The Expanse* (2015-), *Ascension* (2014) and *12 Monkeys* (2015-):

> Largely in the last year, Syfy has shifted its course. [Syfy president David] Howe hired new programming chief [Bill McGoldrick] . . . obtained a larger programming budget from parent company Comcast, and has amassed a truly impressive development slate . . . "Because of the cumulative density of the announcements we have made, I think the audiences are recognizing that we're deadly serious about this and we are determined work with some of the biggest names out there," Howe said. "We want to be the destination for the smartest, most provocative [genre dramas]."[27]

While *Dominion* had already aired its first season by the time Howe made this statement, it still was discussed along with this new programming slate. However, *Dominion* was not configured as a quality science fiction like *Battlestar Galactica*. Instead, it was provided as an example of Syfy's willingness to tell stories that include "rough stuff," particularly graphic violence.[28] Although *Dominion*'s "rough" content and dark tone aligned it with the brand shift at Syfy, the series gained neither the "buzz" nor ratings desired by Syfy, and as such, it was cancelled in 2015.[29]

Dominion was a continuation of the 2010 film, *Legion* (Stewart), which focused on the archangel Michael (in the film, Paul Bettany; on television, Tom Wisdom) battling the heavenly host in order to protect one human child, a "chosen one." *Dominion*'s plot starts more than twenty years after the film's plot, jumping to when that child, Alex Lannen (Christopher Egan), is an adult, and his destiny is beginning to be realized. The series focuses on the city of Vega, a human stronghold in a world in which angels, led by Gabriel (Carl Beukes), have taken over. Vega survives in part because Michael acts as its protector. Alex's destiny is slowly revealed to him over the course of the first season; during this season, he is shown reconciling his role and responsibility as the prophesized savior of mankind. Meanwhile, Alex must also bide his time among the humans in which certain powerful elites battle for dominance. Concurrent with Alex's struggles, Michael must negotiate his place within the world. Michael protects humanity, and particularly Alex, but he is also bored by his existence to a certain degree, as displayed by his relatively listless participation in an orgy in the first episode. He struggles with his abiding love for the angels he fights against that he still considers family. Like *Supernatural*, *Dominion* humanizes its angels by rewriting their religious vocations as familial obligations; for example, the angels Michael, Gabriel, and Uriel (Katrina De Candole) are portrayed as siblings dealing with an absent father (God).

In the plot of *Dominion,* the angel war already has raged, bringing about the apocalypse, albeit one that might be mitigated and reversed with the presence of a new savior of mankind, prophesized to be Alex. Whereas *Supernatural* and *Sleepy Hollow* and *The Messengers* focused on preventing the Biblical apocalypse, on *Dominion* the apocalypse in effect already has occurred. It's not a direct Revelation-based version of the apocalypse, with Lucifer playing a key role, but it does feature chosen ones who must fight the end of days as well as the angel Gabriel

fulfilling Lucifer's standard role as an angel jealous of humanity's place among God's creations and reacting to this supposed slight. Gabriel on *Dominion* is not the light bringer or tempter, but he is the show's adversary and acts in the fallen-angel-seeking-dominion-over-humanity role often occupied elsewhere by Lucifer.

The post-Christian elision of Christian culture and American cultural myths was apparent when *Dominion* writers Brusta Brown and John Mitchell Todd explained in an interview that they don't consider *Dominion* to be a religious show.[30] On the one hand, in stating this, they were in line with almost every other writer for these eschatological fantastic shows that I interviewed. No writer I spoke with characterized these shows – shows featuring battling archangels and the four horsemen of the apocalypse, which are characters and tropes taken directly from the Bible and decades of evangelical culture – as religious. To them, as was the case with the quality fantasy series addressed in the previous chapter, religious meant preachy, though they did not explicitly use that term. For most of these writers, the framework for understanding religious television was still stuck in the 1990s era I discuss in chapter one. From the interview with Brown and Todd, I speculated about their attitude toward religious representation, based on how they reacted to the idea that a show such as *Dominion* might be described as religious: they said there was "no religious source" for the show even as Todd said he had spent years before he began working on the show studying angels.[31] The writers' contradictions underscore the complicated negotiation of what "religious" means among many post-network era shows' creatives. For Brown and Todd, their distinction between a "religious source" and angels implies the latter has moved discursively into non-religious categorization, at least within the fantastic genres. Writers in the fantasy and science fiction genres on contemporary television appear much more comfortable discussion their shows' use of

mythology than they do discussing religion or even spirituality. This remains the norm, even as late as these 2014 dramas, especially those like *Dominion* that are faced with less studio and network support and an increased sense of precarity within the writing process. As I will discuss in chapters five and six, the reliance on these old discursive strategies of distancing is becoming less the norm as the influence of streaming television accelerates change in 2015-2016.

During the last few decades, mythology increasingly became an accepted term among television writers, used with regard to both multi-season narrative arcs and the presence of cultural stories featuring supernatural elements.[32] The term mythology can carry religious or spiritual connotations, and it often, but not always, carries such connotations when used in relation to eschatological fantastic dramas. The slipperiness of the term is not new nor wholly reserved for television: Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* has a long arm of influence in contemporary entertainment, and it examines familiar mythology—Hellenic and occasionally other oral storytelling traditions—as both a component of spiritual life and as a key storytelling structure of Western culture. Thus, the use of the term mythology both for crafting an ongoing serial narrative and using supernatural elements to create a set of rules for a show's fantastic world is not unusual for television writers to use. However, folding Christianity into either or both functions belies the cultural presence and impact that Christianity holds in America. For many writers' rooms of contemporary American prime-time dramas, Christianity might be just as far from the staff's cultural milieu as Native American beliefs. This is the case because, as many of the writers I talked to acknowledged, television writers were and remain majority atheist, agnostic, or Jewish. However, because these creatives' writing was also inscribed within an industrial system that must anticipate an audience wider than the make-up of the writers' rooms—even if that audience is no longer mass audience—the fear of alienation

remains. Therefore, it is far less risky for writers to cordon off the religious elements – whether consciously or not – than it is for them to acknowledge their role in telling religiously themed stories.

The Practical Benefits of Denial

Although ideologically, as well as in terms of industrial acceptability, it makes sense that the writers for *Dominion* might not consider the show to be religious and may be due to other factors. More specifically, such elusiveness could be the result of a somewhat difficult production schedule. As *Dominion* writers Brusta Brown and JM Todd told me, they were faced with notable logistical and creative challenges during the process of writing the first season of the series. These included: a condensed time-frame for writing the series' episodes from pilot to finale, minimizing the length of time in which to organize the writers' room, break the episodes, and write the scripts; locational difficulties because the writers' room was in Los Angeles but shooting and production occurred in South Africa, making it difficult for the writing staff to clearly communicate with the production team across such time and distance; and struggles during the first season to find the appropriate tone of the show and voices for the characters.[33] With the room facing such challenges, their decision to characterize the writing as non-religious had some significant practical advantages. For one, dealing with angels-qua-religious figures would likely require research that they simply didn't have the time to conduct. For another, any spiritually contentious themes or scripts might force the network's executives to step in, adding another layer to a writing process that was already significantly compressed.

Thus, likely for pragmatic reasons, the *Dominion* writers' room was "religiously sterile" and they tried to stay away from religious "button words."[34] However, at the same time, they said that there were "no hard rules" about religion, which they explained meant that there was no

religious "source" to their writing; that is, they didn't knowingly draw from the Bible.[35] The primary source they had to engage with was the film on which the series was loosely based; they also drew from their own cultural knowledge of angels and of the dramatic television writing process. Of course, to say that there were "no rules" about religion within the writers' room mere moments after they discussed their desire to stay away from religious "button words" demonstrates the deep ambivalences felt by those on the creative side of the television industry in terms of dealing with religion. On the one hand, the writers said that the show was "meant to reach everyone" and that they were "trying not to alienate any audience," but on the other, *they were writing a show about warring angels that opens with the archangel Michael participating in an orgy.* The writers "took all the stuff humanity deal[s] with and put it on the angels," allowing them to "study humanity through angels." This projection was conceived of as a part of their creative responsibility as television writers: to write relatable stories.[36] However, positioning angels as non-religious figures in a non-religious show aided in these claims of crafting relatable stories. This denial of religion was a pragmatic construction of an industry discourse that maximized the risk-reward balance of a high-concept fantastic premise on Syfy, a niche cable outlet trying to regain the industrial position it had when it aired a fantastic quality drama that happened to also represent religion, *Battlestar Galactica*. *Dominion*'s writers could protect their work and position within Hollywood television culture by characterizing religious tropes as mere cultural mythology.

CONTAINMENT AS CULTURAL MYTHOLOGY: *SLEEPY HOLLOW*

When the Fox broadcast network series *Sleepy Hollow* began airing in 2013, it quickly became a surprise hit both in terms of critical reception and viewer ratings.[37] The show was pitched by a relative unknown, Phillip Iscove, and was premised on an ostensibly ludicrous mix

of American history, public domain legend, and procedural drama.[38] The relative newness of Iscove to the series process was balanced out experienced producers, Roberto Orci and Alex Kurtzman, whose prior production, *Fringe,* had just concluded its five-year run on producer-distributor Fox. Orci and Kurtzman were uniquely positioned figures within the television industry: prolific television producers within the fantastic genre who were also among the most sought-after writers for major film franchises like *Star Trek* (Abrams, 2009) and *Transformers* (Bay, 2007). In short, Orci and Kurtzman wield massive symbolic (and economic) capital within the television industry. Orci and Kurtzman's symbolic capital, as well as the show's vertically integrated status, likely helped it secure a spot on the network. Moreover, *Sleepy Hollow* was one of several male-skewing shows (also including *Rake* [2014] and *Almost Human* [2013-2014]) that the network greenlit in its attempt to build on their success with the serial killer drama, *The Following* (2013-2015).[39] Paired on Monday night with Fox procedural mainstay, *Bones* (2005-), *Sleepy Hollow* slightly outperformed fellow freshman series, *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* (ABC, 2013-), which had the backing of the massive Marvel Cinematic Universe and Disney-Marvel relationship to build its audience.[40] *Sleepy Hollow*'s first season was hailed for its diversity (the co-lead is a black woman), its sense of humor, and its tight narrative pacing. The storyline for the first season centered around the Biblical end of the world.[41] Gradually by the third season, the writers have re-articulated the main characters' calling as the "witnesses" from the Book of Revelation as part of more general and hybrid pagan mythology from ancient cultures. Thus the focus for this study is on *Sleepy Hollow*'s initial premise and first and second seasons.

Sleepy Hollow is more closely aligned with *Supernatural* than with *Dominion* due to its focus on preventing the apocalypse rather than mitigating its aftermath. *Sleepy Hollow* is also the show that perhaps most stringently adheres to the Biblical apocalypse in its use of George

Washington's Bible as the narrative's guide for season one. Meanwhile, it follows *Supernatural* writers' discursive practices of using other types of monsters to inoculate them from appearing religious. A writer for *Sleepy Hollow* told me, "It's not that our show is religious. I mean, we had that episode with the Native American skin walker. Any cultural myth is up for grabs."[42] *Supernatural* set the bar eschatological fantastic dramas, modeling how to represent other belief systems and monsters in addition to the Biblical Christian apocalypse over-arching narrative premise. This *Sleepy Hollow* writer's use of a Native American skin walker—one example from one episode—to support the claims of Christianity as mythology recalls the same strategy and same mythological creature used in *Supernatural*'s first season, discussed above. Both series share some industrial positioning as broadcast dramas, but from netlet to network and 2005 to 2013, it's clear little has changed regarding the attitude of writers toward religion and how it then gets represented on eschatological fantastic shows.

Sleepy Hollow's premise is ludicrous on the page: Ichabod Crane (Tom Mison) battled the Headless Horseman (Jeremy Owens/Neil Jackson) as part of the American Revolutionary War. His wife, a witch (Katia Winter), cast a spell linking Crane's lifespan to the Headless Horseman, leading Ichabod to wake from a two-century stasis when the demon Moloch (Derek Mears) raised the Headless Horseman in order to incite the apocalypse in 2013 Sleepy Hollow, New York. The Horseman, it turns out, is not only the tormenter of Ichabod in the town of Sleepy Hollow, but rather is also the Biblical Horseman, Death, riding on his pale horse as a sign of the end days. In the contemporary timeline of the series, Ichabod partners with Sleepy Hollow sheriff's lieutenant (and later FBI agent) Abby Mills (Nicole Beharie). Together they serve as the foretold Witnesses who are tasked with trying to stop the rise of the Four Horsemen and thus the (literal) rise of Hell on Earth. Over the course of the first two season, Ichabod and Abby fight

witchcraft, demons, monsters, being trapped in purgatory, and an angel. In short, they face all kinds of mystical and religious threats. The show draws equally from American history and Biblical narratives to establish an alternate history in which America's founders were fighting both the British and the minions of Hell.

In my interview with one of the writers for the show, the individual emphasized that the show did not provide a twist on religion but rather "twistery" (twist on history). This "twistery" represented the main narrative source from the show. As indicated by this writer's desire for anonymity as well as their focus on the historical aspects of the show during our interview, it is evident that the religious premise is still mostly deemed risky by creatives in the precarious climate of the post-network television industry.[43] Those who expressed the strongest desire to remain anonymous during the course of my interviews typically were staff writers who depended on personal connections and experiences in a variety of writers' rooms in order to continue to retain a paycheck and job mobility in the television industry. On a related note, another staff writer on a different eschatological fantastic show agreed to be interviewed anonymously for this project. However, this individual subsequently backed out after seeing my interview questions (which, as shown in Appendix C, should be noted to avoid asking for personal or privileged information and gossip). This person told me that they did not feel comfortable talking about religion on their show, full stop. Yet another writer on an eschatological fantastic show agreed to answer some questions via email anonymously, but their answers were short and relatively unsubstantial on the topic. These anonymous staff writers on a few of the fantastic series that deal with or have dealt with a Biblical apocalypse – or more generally focused on religious narratives – were relatively few in number. But it is worth emphasizing the power dynamics at play here, and thinking about what may not have been said by these evasive lower-level figures

versus what was said on the record by those with a more stable employment status and in higher positions of power. The fact that all of the anonymous writers for shows within my case studies fell within this chapter support the idea that the claim of mythology by creatives working within this field is a discursive side-stepping of religion. Writers claim their shows in this form are not religious, and yet the fact that so many of their writers feel threatened by talking about their work, even when anonymous or even when they claim they are working in mythology not religion indicates the continued power of the religion's riskiness. The writers I interviewed for this chapter all displayed a degree of discomfort and contradiction in their discussion of their work with religious representation. Even as they deny its religiousness, they still clearly feel the risk associated with religion.

Mythology and Public Discourses of the Biblical as Narrative Well

Whereas the *Sleepy Hollow* writer I interviewed generally avoided discussing religion on the show except when pressed or asked specifically about the subject, executive producers Roberto Orci and Alex Kurtzman have openly discussed the influence and use of the Bible in published interviews, such as one for *TV Guide*. The article in question made the subject clear: "*Sleepy Hollow* Bosses Find Inspiration in the Bible."[44] Despite the title, only the fourth question out of nine in the interview mentioned the Bible. Once the subject was broached, Orci and Kurtzman observed that they were using the Bible as "an endless well that we can draw from" throughout the rest of their interview, even bringing it up as a guide for both the general story structure of *Sleepy Hollow* and, jokingly, the seven-year plan for the show's narrative. When asked for more details regarding their seven-year plan, Kurtzman began, "As we were looking through *Bible* stories, we came across seven years of tribulations and two witnesses chosen to work out whether or not the apocalypse will happen. It was perfect. It was right there for us."

Orci added, “But we did use that particular passage to pressure the network to keep it on the air, to say, "It's in *the Bible*!" [*Laughs*],” and Kurtzman added, “[*Laughs*] Do you want to defy *The Bible*?”[45]

That two well-established writers and producers openly talked about their use of the Bible without the hesitation dominates the industrial discourse regarding religion. The tone used by Orci and Kurtzman in this public interview indicated just how embedded and naturalized the post-Christian sensibility has become among a certain tier of empowered television creatives. Insulated by genre conventions, assumptions about the target audience (i.e., not middlebrow), and most significantly their own power within the industry, the two high-profile producers who possessed a great deal of cultural capital within the industry were free to treat the Bible as a joke, a post-Christian cultural object without cultural weight. Below is the specific question about the use of the Bible and their response in its entirety to more fully illustrate their ease in speaking about religion in an irreverent manner:

> **Since the storyline has a connection to *The Bible*, what stories are you being inspired by from that?**
>
> Kurtzman: I think we gravitated toward *The Bible* as being really relevant to our storytelling once it became about the Four Horseman of the Apocalypse.
>
> Orci: There are a lot of characters that we are inspired by in *The Bible*. There are a lot of characters that play into coming in and out of the apocalypse — The Seven Signs, what's our version of that and who can we adapt that that's not so obvious? Even the population of Sleepy Hollow is 144,000 — that's a number from *The Bible*. There are a lot of details from *The Bible*, but we're not trying to do *The Bible* literally. But *The Bible i*n a more general sense as a marker for American history; we're being inspired by American history

and the legends of our cultures. *The Bible* is the starting point, but we want to visit various cultures' interpretations of religion and posit the idea of any bible in any culture is, in a way, a description and an impressionistic interpretation of the one true world religion that we must all be somehow apart of.

Kurtzman: Everyone has different interpretations of *The Bible* and what it means. Ultimately, whether you believe the stories literally or you think they're allegory or metaphor, they are about how we live our lives and they are a search of meaning of why we're here on the planet and what our purpose is as a species. Each story raises a question about how we live our lives, so in that sense, it's the best and the first drama. It really is. It's an endless well that we can draw from.[46]

In these remarks, Orci makes clear that they were using the Bible "as inspiration" and that the Good Book was looped in with American history as a "legend of our culture." Their approach was in sync with other wider industry discourses that framed the use of religious texts as resources for overarching narratives, especially for shows dealing with the apocalypse. Religious texts are regularly cited by creative figures for their value as useful, familiar mythologies – mythologies that are uncritically assumed familiar to Americans. These texts have become naturalized as uncomplicated stories that can be drawn from by Hollywood producers in a manner similar to how they might draw from American mythological history of the founding fathers. According to them, Christianity is a part of American history just like any other element, not special or set apart from other aspects of American culture and history. Kurtzman and Orci's frequently irreverent answers and unprovoked allusions to the Bible in the *TV Guide* interview illustrate how little risk they perceived to be attached to in drawing from the Bible.

Kurtzman's description of the Bible as allegory and metaphor reinforces his employment of a literary approach to the material, as opposed to a theological approach. However, the Bible as literature, or "the best and first drama" as he described it, takes God out of the equation. In doing so, the producers set *Sleepy Hollow* and the Bible in the same realm of art and entertainment. Both the Bible and *Sleepy Hollow* tell stories about religious entities, morality, and divinely situated supernatural goings on in their respective settings. However, *Sleepy Hollow* is not telling a story that aims to teach and proscribe. It is not preachy. The Bible is. Nonetheless, if you can excise the religious purpose and message from the Bible, then it can be seen as "a well" from which storytellers can endlessly draw. And indeed, this is what they do, especially with the eschatological fantasy dramas discussed in this chapter. The New Testament's Book of Revelation provides the apocalyptic series that are the focus here with a built-in high-stakes, fantastic, and culturally familiar narrative structure and dynamic cast of characters with which to play.

The same can be said of *Supernatural* and *Dominion*, even if their producers have not been quite as overtly irreverent. Orci and Kurtzman approached their discussion of religious representation directly and in such a way publicly that they seemed wholly unconcerned with offending anyone or even considering it possible that people might be offended. They conveyed the attitude that, to take offense with their treatment of the Bible would be akin to taking personal offense at a new adaptation of "Little Red Riding Hood" – not a cultural institution and belief structure that forms the foundation of many people's daily lives. Orci and Kurtzman have the symbolic capital within the industry to speak clearly and directly without fear of being perceived as religious, and their position is also aided in the fact that they were not ongoing creatives working on the series. They could take the credit for its success under their purview

and their suggestions for the premise without fearing that the day-to-day work in religious representation would color their industrial personas. Other writers interviewed in these eschatological fantastic case studies did not have near the same capital nor distance. Thus, Erik Kripke, Brusta Brown and JM Todd, and the anonymous staff writers I spoke with were cagy, protective, and worried. For them, religion remained dangerous, even if producers like Orci and Kurtzman had fully embraced post-Christian denial of religiousness.

SIGNIFIERS VS. DEFINERS: LIMITS OF RELIGION AS POST-CHRISTIAN MYTHOLOGY

Whatever their specific approach to the Biblical apocalypse, a key characteristic of eschatological fantastical dramas is that they assert that God exists and that certain parts of the Bible – and specifically the New Testament's apocalypse – are true, at least within the show's narrative world. Lucifer, God, the archangels, prophets, and the four horsemen of the apocalypse are all characters on these shows. They interact with the human protagonists. Their mere existence, particularly their existence in Biblically foretold apocalypse narratives, asserts the veracity of at least part of the Bible. It turns belief into fact, and it does so in a way that leaves open or even invites the conclusion that the other supernatural stories of the New and Old Testament might be more than allegory or symbolic cultural storytelling.

This kind of Biblical literalism is a conclusion that most writers I spoke with seemed not to recognize. The exception to ignoring potential theological ramifications was John Rogers, who wrote a line into the dialogue covering the paradox of representing elements of the Bible literally within the diegetic world of the show while also not wanting to make theological claims. He did this in his episodic adventure series, *The Librarians* (TNT, 2014-). He said:

> We actually talked about that in an episode where a [character says], "Does that mean if the holy grail exists and if there's a Judas chalice, then the Bible is literally true? I am

> literally looking at shit from the Bible. Does that mean that we've lost free will? Does that mean they are proof of God? That's what I'm getting from all of this." And that character is an atheist. And we did joke that we have this runner that all these things on the show from the mythology are real except God. [Laughs.] We thought maybe that wouldn't go over so well. So it's not something that we rush without talking about it.[47]

Rogers noted the hesitation felt by writers when dealing with religious representation, not just as a vague sense of unease and worry, but as having potentially theological ramifications. He said that he and his writers didn't want to "rush" representing religion without talking about how representing these Biblical elements might comment on the existence of God. As a result, *The Librarians* focused more on pagan myths than the Biblical objects that its preceding TV movies (TNT, 2004, 2005, 2008) had done. But Rogers was an outlier. Indeed, he was the only writer I spoke with throughout the course of the research for this dissertation who considered the possible religious implications of representing religion. He was also one of the few who acknowledged the religious histories of Christianity's tropes and characters. Rogers' self-reflection was even more exceptional because, as an episodic, comedic adventure show, his show less seriously and less serially represents religion than any other show that deals with this subject. Regardless of whether explicitly acknowledged by the writers of these shows or not, proof of faith is an implication of eschatological fantasy. This proof of faith is one of the things making this subset of programs potentially riskier industrially, for it makes it more difficult for creatives to distance themselves from religion unless they outright deny their works' religiousness.

Rogers, however, offered a reason as to why neither network executives nor religious viewers protest such storytelling and representational practices. He described the distinction between representing the tropes of religion and representing the core of religious belief (with

religious messaging, intended or otherwise), referenced above as the difference between religious signifiers and religious definers. He discussed the Holy Grail and the Spear of Destiny, objects from the Crucifixion of Jesus, as "signifiers of religion." These objects he placed in contrast to concepts such as the existence of God or divinity of Jesus, which he characterized as "definers of religion."[48] Rogers' claim was born out in my other interviews, such as when a writer for *Sleepy Hollow* told me, "Fox knows we won't touch Jesus. We actually mention him, but we aren't going to have a story about him."[49] But Rogers was the only one of my interviewees who articulated such a distinction as a larger ideological construct. Orci and Kurtzman reflected a similar sensibility when they called the Bible a narrative well; to them the Book of Revelation was a signifier. The anonymous writer and the writers for *Dominion* implied they instinctively knew the boundaries of what is accessible in religious representation: angels, not Jesus (or, signifiers, not a definer). Without clearly stating these boundaries or even calling them boundaries, creatives working on eschatological fantastic dramas displayed and internalized understanding of this distinction that guided their work. While Rogers' cognitive framing seems apt for describing religious representation across the board, it is especially pertinent to the eschatological fantastic dramas discussed in this chapter because they provide the most holistically overt representations of these so-called religious signifiers in the form of the Book of Revelations. The division between signifiers and definers gets to the heart of the assumptions and naturalized rules of religion on television.

Signifiers of religion are rich in cultural value and are the main source for post-Christian re-use across television dramas. They are easily translatable to television through objects and peripheral figures, elements that can rest on the border of religion and fantasy, miracle and magic. These objects and peripheral figures don't directly challenge or comment on religious

beliefs or practices. But they have the potential to be seen as challenging or commenting on such beliefs and practices by audiences familiar with these tropes and themes. They are familiar, known properties that are widely culturally legible in a Christian (or post-Christian) America. The draw of familiarity and distancing through denial are the core of how many decisions are made by creatives about what religious elements are incorporated into a fantastic show's narrative and also how that incorporation is discussed by its writers. In a postmodern sense, the religious signifiers have become unattached from their religious signifieds in Hollywood writers' rooms. The wide cultural circulation of these objects and figures provides a common cultural language exploited by writers and understood by audiences. Part of that understanding is that it is detached, at least consciously, from religion. This detachment leads to even more religious (read: Christian) based narratives on American television alongside the discursively constructed absence of acknowledgement that these things are religious or carry religious symbolic baggage. Angels lose their Christian context to become transtheistic or merely religious pastiche; the Biblical apocalypse becomes merely a well for mythological stories.

While the denial of religiousness is a strategy across fantastic dramas without quality designation, it is especially egregious for eschatological fantastic dramas because they are basically adapting a key Book of the Bible. To do so is risky as it hems so closely to preachy Biblical adaptations like Mark Burnett's Biblical adaptations such *as The Bible* (History, 2013) and *A.D: The Bible Continues* (NBC, 2015)*,* discussed in chapter one. To avoid being perceived within the industry as preachy or religious, eschatological fantastic dramas take an extreme postmodern approach: the evacuation of religiousness from the primary Holy Text of Christianity. Through their use of the Book of Revelation as a narrative guide for their apocalyptic premises, eschatological fantastic dramas turn religion into (public domain) literature

and perform a pastiche of that literature. While creatives on other fantastic dramas may take individual figures—like the Devil in *Lucifer* (Fox, 2016-) and angels/demons in *Constantine* (NBC, 2014-2015), which will be discussed in the next chapter—the creatives working on eschatological dramas of this chapter place the signifieds of religion within their original context (the Bible, or at least the Book of Revelation), maintain their Biblical function regarding the apocalypse, and yet claim them as not religious. The discursive turn in non-quality fantastic dramas displays the apotheosis of the post-Christian sensibility and the continued risk of religion within the prime-time television industry and its creatives.

As illustrated in the case studies above, regardless of the outlets on which they appear or the business models employed by their networks, to the producers of eschatological dramas, their shows are not at all religious. They do not see themselves as even dealing with religion because the religious elements have become unmoored from their theological foundations and re-inscribed in the mythology of fantastic genres.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I've argued that creatives working on eschatological fantastic dramas consider their shows' religious representations as not religious in any way they can claim discursively. In fact, they don't even consider their shows to be spiritual in the sense that creatives for quality fantastic dramas in the previous chapter claimed. For eschatological fantastic dramas, religion has become a pastiche of itself in the form of mythology. This strategy of containment manifests in slightly different ways across the three shows considered as case studies for this chapter, *Supernatural, Dominion,* and *Sleepy Hollow*. *Supernatural,* as the earliest and longest-running series of this group, hesitated to overtly represent the Biblical

apocalypse in its first seasons, only hinting at the religious narrative that was the show's guiding premise. When the religious narrative became central during season four, *Supernatural*'s writers and showrunner asserted that their use of the Biblical apocalypse, angels, Lucifer, and God were not religious, but rather functioned merely as mythology to be used to tell a humanistic story. *Dominion*'s writers, too, maintained that their show about angels and the apocalypse was not religious. Their assertion, couched in contradictions and practical limitations on the writing process, illustrated the ways that religious representation and writers' understanding of it is unstable. Finally, *Sleepy Hollow*'s producers' and writers' distinct approaches to religion illustrate the role that industrial clout can play in how writers and producers understand a show's representation of religion. The well-established, powerful executive producers talked openly and publicly about *Sleepy Hollow*'s religious representation as non-religious mythology; in contrast, a lower-level staff writer required anonymity in order to feel comfortable discussing the show's use of religion. This protection was deemed necessary even as they, and every other writer for these three shows I spoke with or read in public interviews, denied that the show was religious.

Despite the different ways they discussed their respective shows' religious representations, all of the showrunners, staff writers, and producers I spoke with uniformly maintained that – as used in their shows – the Bible was mythology, not religion. Such abstraction, to the point of pastiche, indicates the longevity of the network-era ideology that religion is alienating for both creatives and the upscale audiences their shows target. This decades-old perspective largely remained in place even with fantastic genres that provided the safety of displaced reality.

Overall, the writers for all three of the shows discussed in this chapter shared the viewpoint that their shows were not religious despite their use of Bible characters and the Book

of Revelation in ways that bordered on Biblical literalism. For these writers, within a post-Christian sensibility, the Bible was merely a cultural source, like fairy tales, folklore, and history. This group of shows exemplifies another manifestation of the pattern of avoidance in prime-time creatives' ideology. Eschatological fantastic dramas use their generic unreality to categorize religious representation as mythology and thus not as religion. The fantastic genres' allowance of the "reality" of monsters, magic, and myth creates a safe space for representing religion – that is, as long as the creatives working in that genre group religion with the unreal. By separating religion from its history and function, they believe their shows are protected from being perceived as preachy or blasphemous – even as they draw directly from religious scripture.

---

[1] Matthew Hills, *Fan Cultures* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 43.
[2] See: Karen A. Ritzenhoff and Angela Krewani, eds., *The Apocalypse in Film: Dystopias, Disasters, and Other Visions about the End of the World* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015); Jeffrey M. Tripp, "Gabriel, Abortion, and Anti-Annunciation in The Prophecy, Constantine, and Legion," *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 27, no. 1 (2015): 57–70.; Maaheen Ahmed and Martin Lund, "Apocalypse Why? The Neutralisation of the Antichrist in Three Comics Adaptations," *Scan | Journal of Media Arts Culture* 9, no. 1 (2012), http://scan.net.au/scn/journal/vol9number1/Maaheen-Ahmed-and-Martin-Lund.html; Torin Monahan, "Marketing the Beast: Left Behind and the Apocalypse Industry," *Media, Culture & Society* 30, no. 6 (November 1, 2008): 813–30, doi:10.1177/0163443708096095; W Andy Knight, "Eschatology, Religion and World Order," *Religious Studies and Theology* 29, no. 1 (2010): 1–24, doi:10.1558/rsth.v29i1.1.
[3] Both shows feature many catastrophes called "the apocalypse" but do not use the Biblical version or its characters explicitly. Thus, they are not part of this grouping.
[4] Jon R. Stone, "A Fire in the Sky: 'Apocalyptic' Themes on the Silver Screen," in *God in the Details: American Religion in Popular Culture*, ed. Eric Michael Mazur and Kate McCarthy, 2nd Ed. (New York: Routledge, 2011), 64.
[5] Karen A. Ritzenhoff and Angela Krewani, "Introduction," in *The Apocalypse in Film: Dystopias, Disasters, and Other Visions about the End of the World*, ed. Karen A. Ritzenhoff and Angela Krewani (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), xiii.
[6] Lisa McMinn, "Y2K, The Apocalypse, and Evangelical Christianity: The Role of Eschatological Belief in Church Responses," *Sociology of Religion* 62, no. 2 (2001): 208.
[7] Ibid., 188.
[8] Peter Gardella, *American Angels: Useful Spirits in the Material World* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2007), 2.
9. Ibid., 192.

[10] Regina M. Hansen, "Deconstructing the Apocalypse? Supernatural's Postmodern Appropriation of Angelic Hierarchies," in *Supernatural, Humanity, and the Soul*, ed. Susan A. George and Regina M. Hansen (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 23.
[11] Line Nybro Petersen, "Renegotiating Religious Imaginations through Transformations of 'Banal Religion' in 'Supernatural,'" *Transformative Works and Cultures* 4, no. 0 (July 1, 2010).
[12] Laura Prudom, "'*Supernatural'* at 200: The Road So Far, An Oral History," *Variety*, November 11, 2014, http://variety.com/2014/tv/spotlight/supernatural-oral-history-200-episodes-ackles-padalecki-kripke-1201352537/; "Ratings - *Smallville* and '*Supernatural'* on the Rise, Performing at Or Near Season Highs | TheFutonCritic.com," *Futon Critic*, October 31, 2008, http://www.thefutoncritic.com/ratings/2008/10/31/smallville-and-supernatural-on-the-rise-performing-at-or-near-season-highs-29378/20081031cw01/.
[13] Prudom, "*Supernatural*;" Matt Webb Mitovich and Matt Webb Mitovich, "*Smallville*, *Supernatural* Returns Delayed a Week," *TVLine*, January 28, 2011, http://tvline.com/2011/01/27/smallville-supernatural-returns-delayed-a-week/; Ken Tucker, "The CW's Identity Crisis: Are 'Supernatural' and 'Smallville' Better than 'Gossip Girl' and '90210'?," *Entertainment Weekly's EW.com*, February 26, 2010, http://www.ew.com/article/2010/02/26/cw-smallville-supernatural-smallville-gossip-girl-90210.
[14] Mike Flacy, "Netflix Cuts Deal for *Supernatural* and Other CW Shows," *Digital Trends*, October 13, 2011, http://www.digitaltrends.com/home-theater/netflix-cuts-deal-for-supernatural-and-other-cw-shows/.
[15] I want to note that the iterative mode of storytelling that this exemplifies may connect with Christian theology's artistic trope of prefiguration in which stories, images, and people from before the time of Christ are reconfigured as foreshadowing Jesus's coming.
[16] Freidric Jameson, "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," in *Media and Cultural Studies: Key Works,* ed. Douglas M. Kellner and Meenakshi Gigi Durham, Revised ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 493.
[17] Prudom, "Supernatural;" Liana Bekakos, "*Supernatural* Creator Eric Kripke Answers Fan's Questions – Part III," *EclipseMagazine*, accessed April 12, 2016, http://eclipsemagazine.com/supernatural-creator-eric-kripke-answers-fan%E2%80%99s-questions-%E2%80%93-part-iii/
[18] Maureen Ryan, "'It's the Fun Apocalypse': Creator Eric Kripke Talks 'Supernatural' - The Watcher," *Chicago Tribune*, 26 2009, http://featuresblogs.chicagotribune.com/entertainment_tv/2009/08/supernatural-season-5-eric-kripke-cw.html.
[19] Prudom, "*Supernatural*."
[20] Elizabeth G. Wolfe, "The Greatest of These: The Theological Virtues and the Problem of an Absent God in Supernatural," in *Supernatural, Humanity, and the Soul*, ed. Susan A. George and Regina M. Hansen (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 13–26; Charlotte E. Howell, "God, the Devil, and John Winchester: Failures of Patriarchy in Supernatural," in *Supernatural, Humanity, and the Soul*, ed. Susan A. George and Regina M. Hansen (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 13–26; Regina M. Hansen, "Deconstructing the Apocalypse? Supernatural's Postmodern Appropriation of Angelic Hierarchies," in *Supernatural, Humanity, and the Soul*, ed. Susan A. George and Regina M. Hansen (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 13–26; Erika Engstrom and Joseph M. Valenzano, "Demon Hunters and Hegemony: Portrayal of Religion on the CW's Supernatural," *Journal of Media and Religion* 9, no. 2 (April 30, 2010): 67–83;

Annalee Newitz, "Is 'Supernatural' For Atheists?," May 21, 1009, http://io9.com/5265112/is-supernatural-for-atheists.
[21] Anonymous writer C, telephone interview, September 16, 2014.
[22] Anonymous writer B, personal correspondence, May 20, 2015.
[23] Barbara Selznick, "Branding the Future: Syfy in the Post-Network Era," *Science Fiction Film and Television* 2, no. 2 (2009): 177.
[24] Marisa Guthrie, "Syfy's Two-Pronged Rebrand Strategy," *Broadcasting & Cable*, June 21, 2009, http://www.broadcastingcable.com/news/programming/syfys-two-pronged-rebrand-strategy/34994.
[25] Selznick, 196; James Hibberd, "Syfy Plans to Lure You Back with These 5 Shows," *Entertainment Weekly's EW.com*, October 28, 2014, http://www.ew.com/article/2014/10/28/syfy.
[26] Rowan Kaiser, "Syfy Is De-Rebranding and It's the Most Compelling Thing on TV," *Inverse*, November 19, 2015, https://www.inverse.com/article/8354-syfy-is-releasing-a-film-de-rebranding-and-becoming-super-interesting.
[27] Hibberd.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Hibberd; Elizabeth Wagmeister, "Syfy Cancels 'Dominion' After Two Seasons," *Variety*, October 13, 2015, http://variety.com/2015/tv/news/dominion-cancelled-syfy-season-two-1201617277/.
[30] Brusta Brown and JM Todd, interview, April 23, 2015.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Mythology has also colloquially become used for the general serial narrative, likely based on its use in reference to the alien-mystery based episodes of *The X-Files* (Fox, 1993-2002).
[33] Brusta Brown and JM Todd, interview.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Josef Adalian, "Anatomy of a Hit: Why Sleepy Hollow Became Fall TV's Breakout Success," *Vulture*, October 14, 2013, http://www.vulture.com/2013/10/why-fox-sleepy-hollow-breakout-hit.html.
[38] Ibid.
[39] Cynthia Littleton, "Fox Aims for Men with Four Drama Series Orders," *Variety*, May 9, 2013, http://variety.com/2013/tv/news/fox-orders-four-dramas-series-for-2013-14-1200478203/.
[40] Adalian, "Anatomy of a Hit."
[41] Adalian, "Anatomy of a Hit;" Laura Prudom, "What Every TV Show Can Learn from *Sleepy Hollow*," *The Week,* December 3, 2013, http://theweek.com/articles/455254/what-every-tv-show-learn-from-sleepy-hollow.
[42] Anonymous writer C, telephone interview, September 16, 2014.
[43] See: Mark Deuze, *Media Work*, Digital Media and Society Series (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007).
[44] "Sleepy Hollow Bosses Find Inspiration in the Bible," *TV Guide*, accessed January 15, 2014, http://www.tvguide.com/news/sleepy-hollow-alex-kurtzman-roberto-orci-1070348.aspx.
[45] Ibid.
[46] Ibid.
[47] John Rogers, telephone interview, August 21, 2014.

[48] Ibid.
[49] Anonymous writer C, telephone interview, September 16, 2014.

Chapter Five Double Containment: Adaptations of Fantastic Religious Comics

Adapting Religion For The Post-Christian Television Industry

The previous chapter examined recent fantastic television shows that adapted Biblical texts of the apocalypse. This chapter concerns fantastic television adaptations of copyrighted material and licensed intellectual property: the characters and storyworlds from the comic book series *Hellblazer* (DC/Vertigo 1988-2013)*, Lucifer* (DC/Vertigo 2000-2006), and *Preacher* (DC/Vertigo 1995-2000) as they were adapted into C*onstantine* (NBC, 2014-2015)*, Lucifer* (Fox, 2016-)*,* and *Preacher* (AMC, 2016-), respectively. Comic book adaptations offer familiarity and name recognition that can help recruit an audience and keep them viewing. Moreover, these adaptations utilize fantastic genre conventions and the attendant propensity for creatives to characterize religion as mythology to ensure religious stories and characters are not risky in relation to the shows' target fan audience or writers' ideologies. In addition to this set of conditions for television with religious subjects, like those discussed in the previous chapter, there is another advantage to utilizing comic books as a source material: the religious elements already had been vetted in the earlier medium. As a result, the potentially ideologically dangerous origin of religious representation is displaced from adapters onto that earlier form and its creative team.[1] This allows for more freedom of religious representation within this double containment while also minimizing the potential for legacy strategies for cultivating edge. *Constantine* was positioned in denial of its niche, let along potential edginess, due to NBC's broadcast directive of broad audience appeal. *Lucifer* faced religious protest from activist group One Million Moms before it premiered, but that protest was framed as inconsequential, not

valuable to the show because the comic book in which the character originated faced the same kind of protests twenty years prior. Though just launched on AMC at the time of this writing, *Preacher* may prove an exception. It is positioned as potentially in the quality fantastic mode (similar to discussed in chapter three) due to its place within AMC's boutique brand. Further, its creatives' utilization of religion within its production discourse, while still contained, is more explicit and diverse than most other case studies.

This chapter focuses on three comic book adaptations drawn from the properties held by the DC Entertainment division of the Time Warner media conglomerate. *Constantine* was an adaptation of *Hellblazer* from DC comics and its age-restricted (or "mature" audience) imprint, Vertigo. *Lucifer* and *Preacher* are both adaptations of comics of the same name, also from DC's Vertigo imprint. It is important to situate these shows within both their corporate conglomerate parent's holdings as well as within a current post-network era environment in which superhero television is becoming increasingly commonplace. Unlike many of the comic book adaptations across the current television landscape (e.g., *The Flash* [CW, 2014-], *Arrow* [CW, 2012-], and *Supergirl* [CBS, 2015-]), the characters in each of these series are definitively not superheroes: no capes, no cowls, and no vigilante justice. Instead, they are mostly comic-book antiheroes, flawed individuals—human or not—fighting a battle of good versus evil within a fantastic religious context. The adaptations which comprise the case studies of this chapter are both part of and a result of the boom in religious representation studied thus far in this dissertation. They are equally a result of the economic drive at Warner Bros. Entertainment to maximize their profits by making use of their comic book intellectual properties through licensing adaptations for television series. Prior to this chapter's case studies, Warner Bros. and DC Comics previously found success in this industrial practice with shows like *Smallville* (WB/CW, 2001-2011) and

Arrow (CW, 2012-). The WB and its successor, the CW, tend to be superhero based, while the ones in this study are not, which helps to explain why these shows appear on other outlets seeking a niche similar to what the CW has found without challenging that netlet's vertically-integrated dominance.

In each case study, what can be seen is a small but engaged upscale pre-established fan audience is targeted to varying degrees. For this fan audience, comprised in part of readers of the books on which the series were based, those religious stories presumably already had been proven acceptable, although the readers of these comic book by no means represent enough of an audience to make the shows viable by industry standards. Interestingly, executives and creatives for each of these series made few alterations to the core religious elements which appeared in their source materials, even though they significantly changed other aspects of the books' stories and the characters. From his translation from comic book to television screen, John Constantine loses his bisexuality but not his dealings with angels, hell beasts, and the occult. Lucifer leaves his post as lord of Hell to become a bored bar owner looking to fill his time with the procedural of law and order, but he's still a fallen angel from Hell; and the titular preacher, Jesse Custer, maintains—and in fact emphasizes—his central character arc of navigating his vocation as a preacher in an incredibly violent world while adapting to his newfound God-like power.

Since the imagined audience of fans already knows and is not alienated by the religious content, in interviews, network executives and producers for these shows expressed far less concern about their shows appearing religious than did the creatives involved with apocalyptic or quality fantastic series. However, this lack of concern is the result of two-fold strategies of containment evident in their discourse, not due to the lack of containment. The first strategy of containment, as noted above, is a result of the religious narratives on these shows originating

with other creators in another medium. This dependence on others' material displaces the authority of religious representation from the creatives working on these shows to the comic book creators within a medium – and, in particular, an imprint (Vertigo) – that has anti-middlebrow historical associations. The second strategy of containment is the same strategy discussed in the previous chapter: the fantastic genre elements of the shows discussed in this chapter—magic, the occult, mysticism, and even the potentially larger transmedia comic book world in which they appear—allow for the categorization of religion as mythology. Only with the comic book adaptations discussed here, mythology is located in the comic book source text instead of being drawn from the literalism of the Bible.

Adaptation Studies, Comic Studies, and Conglomerates

In her book, *The Adaptation Industry,* Simone Murray employs a sociological study of adaptation and considers the appropriateness of this approach for examining adaptation practices across audiences and media forms. She writes:

> Nudging adaptation studies beyond its intellectual comfort zone of textual analysis and closely related questions of medium specificity allows us to conceive of something often heralded in adaptation studies but not, to date, fully realized: namely, a *sociology* of adaptation. Such an approach takes us well beyond textual specifics and enables us to ask how the mechanisms by which adaptations are produced influence the kinds of adaptations released, how certain audiences become aware of adapted properties, and how the success of an adaptation may impact differently upon various industry stakeholders. A sociology of adaptation in fact provides an entry point for examining just how unexpectedly contested and fraught are the cross-media and cross-sectoral relationships that make adaptation possible.[2]

Murray's analysis of the adaptation decisions made within the media industries includes examining relationships among stakeholders, assumptions of production professionals, and creative expectations about audience reception. She also addresses questions of textual adaptation with respect to notions beyond mere fidelity claims. Murray asserts the importance of the production process, writing, "Production matters; but who the producers are in an era of infinite digital reproducibility, collective creation and 'producerly' media practice remains an open question."[3] For this chapter, the producers of the television shows studied make use of this open question of collective creator and locus of storytelling in order to allay religious risk by maintaining a discourse of faithfulness to the comic book source texts. Such a discourse of fidelity is made without specific regard to sustaining the continuity of religious narratives as they move from comic book creation and television series, but it is a discursive turn that aids creatives working on these shows in their ability to discuss religion and their work.

The creatives whose interviews provide much of the primary source material for this chapter use a "double knowledge" afforded by adaptation to enable fidelity to the source texts and to their overtly religious premises in order to place the locus of religion on the comic book creator instead of the writer adapting the comic book. In her book, *A Theory of Adaptation*, Linda Hutcheon describes this doubling process of adaptation. She writes, "If we know that prior text, we always feel its presence shadowing the one we are experiencing directly. When we call a work an adaptation, we openly announce its overt relationship to another work or works."[4] Hutcheon further describes most adapters as working to overcome or supplant the primacy of the source text. Comics scholar Elisavet Ioannidou applies that theory specifically to superhero film adaptations.[5] In contrast to Hutcheon and Ioannidou's claims, the producers I spoke with who were working on the comic book television adaptations studied in this chapter have used the

primacy of the source text for their own, distinct means: specifically, they use the source material to inoculate them from the religious label among other industry practitioners who still consider it risky. This also grants writers working in adaptations of religiously themed comic books more latitude to push against religious representation as pure mythology without any religiousness, although they do not use that latitude overmuch.

Because comic book adaptions are based on known, presold properties, often drawn from within the same conglomerate family, the production practices employed with these shows differ from those examined in chapters two through four. Specific production strategies arise and operate here in the context of employing conglomerate synergies (e.g. publisher DC Comics/Vertigo imprint and producer-financier Warner Bros. Television as divisions within Time Warner). Although the majority of Warner Bros.' comic book-base television shows appear on their broadcast channel, the CW, television adaptations of other DC properties, including Lucifer, Constantine, and Jesse Custer (from *Preacher*) have aired or will air on Fox, NBC, and AMC, respectively. Of those three, only *Preacher* is not produced by Warner Bros. Television (it is produced by AMC Studios). This is because *Preacher* is the only one of the three that is creator-owned; both Constantine and Lucifer were DC-owned characters re-invented under the Vertigo imprint in the late 1980s.[6]

While the interrelation of the comic book industry and Hollywood media is relevant to understanding production practices and merits greater discussion, my focus in this chapter is primarily on claims to fidelity that make religious representation safer within the strategies of containment afforded by fantastic genre expectations.[7] This chapter mainly explores what creatives' discourses about these shows' religious narratives reveal about the boom in comic

book adaptations with religious themes as well as how those discourses relate to the other legacy practices regarding religion identified in other chapters of this dissertation.

DC Entertainment Context

In addition to the three case studies of this chapter, there are many other DC Comics-owned properties currently airing as television iterations, including *The Flash* (CW 2014-), *Arrow* (CW, 2012-), *Gotham* (Fox, 2014-), *Supergirl* (CBS, 2015-), and the Vertigo property *iZombie* (CW, 2014-). As noted above, the adaptations with religious premises that are this chapter's case studies are adapted from Vertigo imprints. Vertigo is an age-restricted, adult-oriented imprint within the DC Comics brand formed in 1993 "as a way for writers and illustrators to retain ownership of their work and to be free of the restraints that governed superhero stories."[8] Many of the early successes at Vertigo, including *Hellblazer* and *Sandman* (which would yield the spin-off *Lucifer*), were re-workings of DC Comics characters but told with "mythological, surreal, or religious" approaches.[9] Vertigo made a name for itself by utilizing existing DC properties as well as expanding into new creator-owned titles that were adult-oriented, innovative, "weird."[10] Vertigo's notable comics included *Swamp Thing, The Sandman, Y: The Last Man, Fables,* and *100 Bullets*. Twenty years after Vertigo's launch, those reworked characters – and the religious approaches applied to them – began to be adapted for television. They proved to be well suited for a post-network economy that favored similar adult-oriented, narratively and representationally challenging modes of drama.

Unlike the "weird" identity attached to the Vertigo imprint, the licensing strategy employed for DC's titles (such as *The Flash* and *Supergirl)* has been promiscuous with shows adapted for both broadcast and cable outlets. As Alisa Perren notes, licensing across multiple platforms is part of DC's corporate strategy as a subsidiary of Time Warner. She writes:

> For Time Warner, superheroes such as Superman, The [Green] Arrow, Green Lantern, and Wonder Woman exist primarily for "exploitation across multiple distribution platforms" including film, television and video games. From this particular top-down position, then, comics function primarily as a resource, even an appendage; this division simply fuels the larger licensing and merchandising objectives of a global media corporation.[11]

Such a focus is one of the reasons why DC has adapted even its little-known heroes and comic books from the Vertigo imprint into television series. DC's main comic book rival, Marvel's, strategy is similar to DC's; in their relationship with Netflix, they have mostly lesser-known characters (Jessica Jones, Daredevil, Luke Cage/Power Man), drawn from books with more adult tone and content than can be found in their spandex-clad superhero brethren (Captain America, Thor, Iron Man). (Marvel's strategy will be discussed further in the next chapter with the case study *Daredevil*.) Significantly, both major comic book publishers and the corporate siblings have used their more adult-themed heroes, stories, and comic book imprints to target upscale adult audiences across broadcast, cable, and streaming outlets.

The targeting of adult upscale audiences via dark themes and religious narratives unites the three case studies that are the focus of this chapter While the production discourses regarding adapting the religious narratives from Vertigo comic books to television screens are very similar across the three shows, in each case we can see distinct variations with regard to creative approach and channel positioning of these shows. Further, each show met with markedly different success due to a combination of factors including network support, market positioning, and critical and audience response. NBC, as a network perpetually struggling to grow its audience, struggled to figure out how to position *Constantine*, a seemingly obvious niche show due to its genre, content, and source text.[12] While Fox obviously is also a broadcast network, it

benefited from its stronger history of marketing, programming, and cultivating audiences with fantastic dramas such as *The X-Files* (1993-2002, 2016-) and *Fringe* (2008-2013) Notably, *The X-Files* served as *Lucifer*'s initial lead, helping the show to find stronger broadcast appeal than *Constantine* was able to (7.2 million viewers for its premiere compared to *Constantine*'s 4.3 million).[13] Finally, *Preacher* benefits not only from AMC's different expectations as a basic cable outlet but also due to the show's compatibility with another adult-oriented comic adaptation airing on that channel: *The Walking Dead* (AMC, 2010-; Image Comics, 2003-). Collectively, the case studies in this chapter illustrate the still atavistic thinking of broad audience targeting held by some broadcast networks, the ability of cable outlets to better mobilize upscale fan audiences for adult-oriented comic book adaptations, and the ability of some broadcast networks (or at least Fox, given the right circumstances) to find a middle-ground between mass appeal and niche thinking. Targeting audiences and their tastes is, of course, merely one of many widely ranging forces that factor into any show's perceived success for failure, including the channel's larger schedule, its particular business model including licensing deals, and partnerships with certain talent.[14] But the mass versus niche distinction is a convenient and perpetuated discourse within the industry that helps to shape programming decisions as well as ideology.

There are a few specific advantages afforded to religious comic book adaptations within the current industrial context – regardless of the particular channel on which they appear. First, most comic book stories adapted to television are categorized within fantasy, science fiction, or horror genres and as such are afforded much of the same safety of displacement and minimization discussed in the previous two chapters for those genres. Secondly, if the religious elements are potentially challenging, they have already been vetted and established as part of the

comic book source text. Because the comics prominently featuring religious narratives are published by niche, adult-oriented imprints such as Vertigo, they are already positioned in opposition to middlebrow audiences or tastes. They are weird and outside the mainstream even within the niche of comic books. Third, the writers are afforded the distance of adaptation: creatives do not have to claim any ownership or ideological burden over the religious narrative because they are not their creations. The religious storylines are ascribed to the original comic books and their writers, greatly mitigating the ideological risk within the writers' room and executive offices. Moreover, consistent with the prior discussion about both quality fantasy and eschatological dramas, the writers and executives helming these adaptations are disinterested in attracting the kind of audience that would protest such stories, the perceived middlebrow religious audience. Nonetheless, while creatives largely expressed disinterest in attracting a middlebrow mass audience, my interview with *Constantine* executive producer/writer Mark Verheiden (executive producer and writer on *Constantine)* revealed a much less progressive view of the show's network's target audiences than much general post-network discourse would present.

ATTEMPTING BROADCAST APPEAL: *CONSTANTINE*

Constantine was an adaptation of Vertigo/DC's *Hellblazer* comics that ran from the 1980s on and off into the present and was adapted into a widely-panned film starring Keanu Reeves in 2005.[15] The most popular run of the series was written by Garth Ennis. Ennis also created and wrote the *Preacher* series for Vertigo/DC that was adapted into AMC's *Preacher*. In an interview, Ennis said he was invited into some of the writers' room for *Preacher* but not for *Constantine*.[16] Such a different set of experiences points to the varied approaches to both properties based on their respective outlets. In the case of NBC's *Constantine*, the marginalization of one of the

creative forces from the source property foreshadows the chain of poor executive decisions that led to the show's failure. *Hellblazer*'s history as a challenging adult-oriented comic within the Vertigo imprint brand and the show *Constantine*'s approach to religious representation and its fidelity to the source text's religious stories were appropriate for a show targeting upscale niche audiences such as comic book and fantastic genre fans. Such a confederation of upscale niches fits within the post-network era industry structures. However, according to producer Verheiden, from the outset, NBC wanted the show to appeal to broader, middlebrow audience. The networks' desired audience clashed with the show's genre, writers' intentions, and its mode of religious representation.

Constantine aired on NBC for only one 13-episode season of in 2014 and early 2015. It was paired on Friday nights with NBC's relatively long-running fantasy procedural, *Grimm* (2011-). Friday was NBC's slightly more niche-oriented programming slot, anchored by *Grimm*, in which the network had, immediately prior to *Constantine,* placed upscale fantastic dramas such as *Dracula* (2014-2015) and *Hannibal* (2013-2015), both European co-productions to which *Constantine*'s attempt at broadness seemed a corrective.[17] *Grimm* had proven that Friday nights didn't have to be a television graveyard, but the network bar for ratings success – even on Friday nights and even with Live + ratings numbers – was too high for *Constantine* to achieve.[18] Additionally, the show lost some of its comic book fans and credibility early on when it departed from its comic book origins to become more of a procedural along the lines of *Grimm*.[19] In my conversation with Verheiden, he confirmed the network's desire to broaden the show's appeal.[20] While he appreciated that NBC made a big marketing push for the show early on, their desire for the "broadest possible audience" was difficult to reconcile with the show's main character and narrative premise. He said, "If we had issues creatively on *Constantine*, they were more about

'What is the show?' and 'What are we trying to accomplish with it?' Is the show procedural? . . . Or is it more serialized? NBC wanted more of the former."[21]

The push for procedural structure was born out in NBC's targeting of the audience for *Constantine*, which according to Verheiden was seeking slightly ludicrous multi-quadrant appeal. He told me, "So for [*Constantine*] we'd be . . . hoping the housewives would like it, and that the dockworker could like it, and that the sophisticated comic book fan would like it. It really is a broad brush, and it's a thing that makes it difficult to do that show because you're trying to hit so many audience segments."[22] This aim at coalition (but not necessarily upscale) audience appeal for a semi-serialized, comic-book based story about a morally ambivalent man who accidentally sent an innocent girl to hell, seemed bound to fail. The premise itself is a much harder sell to the general audience NBC was trying to attract than, for instance, DC's superhero comic book adaptations like *The Flash* or *Supergirl*. Those comic book adaptations have much broader cultural recognition of their titular characters and present a much more well-known and appealing formula: good people with the means to do good in the world. John Constantine has neither the same recognition nor the same characteristic "goodness" to base his appeal.

The attempt to turn an ostensibly niche property into a middlebrow, multi-quadrant success belies the general industrial narrative of increased nichification and designation of specific target audiences to counter the fragmentation of the mass audience. There is a widespread assumption by creatives and fans – as well as a dominant discourse by scholars and journalists – that in the post-network era that small, engaged audiences can keep a low-rated show on the air.[23] This is sometimes true – but not always, especially when it comes to broadcast networks struggling to come to terms with their identity and reformulate their business models. It is surprising that NBC tried to appeal to such disparate—and generally thought of as genre-

averse—target audiences as stay-at-home moms and their teenaged sons.[24] Writers working today largely reject the desire for broad appeal and stigmatize it as trying to appeal to too many types of (middlebrow) audiences, especially if the genre for the show is at odds with what is assumed to be middlebrow style and narrative conventions. Thus *Constantine*, a horror-fantasy show adapted from an adult-oriented imprint, became a site of anti-middlebrow religious representations drawn from its comic book source while network considerations tried to (unsuccessfully) push it in content and marketing toward middlebrow, multi-quadrant audience appeal.

Nefarious Angels and Catholic Demons: *Constantine*'s Religious Representations

Constantine presented overt religious representations such as occult magic drawn directly from its comic book source material. The occult magic used by John Constantine (Matt Ryan) uses mystical elements of a variety of world religions, but mainly Christianity. The representation of Christianity as one path of occult magic is a continuation of fantastic genre strategies used in the eschatological fantastic dramas of chapter four. And like those dramas, the specificity of religious representation is pronounced while its religiousness is denied among the writers and producers. This section traces *Constantine*'s religious representations more specifically and addresses how, even as challenging as such representations might have been to true believers, they were made safe due to their status as what Mark Verheiden called "gimmes," drawn from the source text.[25]

The double displacement allowing for specific religious representation, afforded by both adaptation strategies and genre conventions, is displayed in a two-episode arc in which Constantine and his cohorts visit an old friend, Anna Marie (Claire van der Boom) at a nunnery in Mexico. Anna Marie was an occultist who was present the night that John Constantine lost a

girl's soul to Hell. She subsequently retreated to the sisterhood to try to atone for her role in that failed exorcism. At the nunnery, she encountered a Mesopotamian demon, Lamashtu (Paloma Guzmán), disguised as a nun, who is taking newborns to a dastardly but vague end (consumption is implied, but broadcast standards kept the babies' fate unclear). Despite this female demon being Mesopotamian in origin, she is discussed within the show as related to the apocryphal Bible story of Lilith, Adam's demonic first wife. Moreover, when an exorcism is performed in the episode in question, "Saint of Last Resorts," the practice adheres to the cultural knowledge we have of Catholic exorcisms, indicating Christianity's power as a signifier that carries beyond its own book of stories and characters.[26]

As Mark Verheiden explains, the use of Catholic nuns as a front for a baby-stealing demon was not a problem for NBC. Indeed, he noted that most of the potentially controversial religious elements considered givens as enabled by the source material.[27] He said that he "was actually surprised about what *didn't* push buttons on the network side . . . I wrote the episode where Constantine underwent an exorcism. . . But no one brought up that a non-ordained female nun was performing the exorcism . . . I suspect there is a group of viewers [who might have a problem with that but] who would not be interested in *Constantine* based on the subject matter like literal demons."[28] The acceptability of this deviant exorcism may be because Catholic church organizations have a long history on television, particularly on procedural television series like *Law and Order*, for serving as useful visual and narrative short-hand for insular, suspicious, and outside-the-law sites where dreadful, ritualistic activities take place.[29] Catholic otherness, along with knowledge of the source material's known use of various religions' dogma, mysticism, and supernatural elements, set the boundaries of representation available for the

program. *Constantine*'s use of religion is within these boundaries of its genre expectations even as it is contained by the ideology of the shows' creatives.

The source material as well as the show's genre conventions established the limits regarding the types of religious representations available to the show's producers. Once the pilot, "Non Est Asylum," established that Constantine's failed exorcism would remain the key initiating action for his character, religion was necessarily in the narrative mix. Moreover, based on the creatives' decision to make the formerly bisexual John Constantine heterosexual on the show, the development team at NBC had no problem altering certain elements of the original story and characters from the source material as it was adapted to television.[30]

Thus, the use of religion was not a central reason for *Constantine's* downfall. In fact, *Constantine* serves as an example of how decades of containment practices have paradoxically created a context in which religious representation outside of the preachy mode *is* now permissible on prime-time broadcast programming. Yet even as certain types of representation have become more accessible to creatives, *Constantine* also illustrates how little has changed in terms of industrial measurements of success on broadcast. The bar for success (i.e., renewal) may be lower now than it was ten years ago, but there remains an attempt by executives to obtain multi-quadrant broad appeal with most of a network's shows - even those that seem so obviously niche, like *Constantine*. What very clearly has changed in the post-network era is what is considered acceptable representation of religion on network television. Vague spirituality certainly still has a place across the televisual landscape, but more and more television dramas are able to employ greater specificity about religion, particularly overt Christian denominations, as building blocks of their narrative in ways they generally haven't been able to before. Christian characters can discuss their faith without it being too preachy (in fact, they should be anything

but); angels can have personalities and motivations that can challenge Christian dogma and even the boundaries between heaven and hell; and the Devil can be personified not just as sympathetic but even serve as the hero of his own show.

FINDING BROADCAST APPEAL: *LUCIFER*

By 2016, the myriad fantastic dramas that represented overt religion while containing it as mythology had naturalized the idea that religious figures function merely as narrative tools. *Lucifer* is a prime example of how in the post-network era context, even the Devil can lose his religiousness and become mere mythology. More than that, on Fox's *Lucifer*, he can become the hero of a successful broadcast show regardless of religious protest.

On May 29, 2015, the religious news website, *The Christian Post*, reported on a protest petition created by the conservative Christian group, One Million Moms (discussed further below), to persuade Fox to cancel *Lucifer* before any episodes aired. The petition picked up traction in industry circles and on fan news sites, likely because Neil Gaiman, the creator of the comic iteration of the titular character, posted the article on his official Tumblr with a personal response. He wrote:

> Ah. It seems like only yesterday (but it was 1991) that the "Concerned Mothers of America" announced that they were boycotting *Sandman* because it contained Lesbian, Gay, Bi and Trans characters. It was Wanda that upset them most: the idea of a Trans Woman in a comic book… They told us they were organising a boycott of *Sandman*, which they would only stop if we wrote to the American Family Association and promised to reform. I wonder if they noticed it didn't work last time, either…[31]

Gaiman's response articulates one of the recurring themes created around the television adaptation of religious stories and characters from comic books: that, to certain conservatives,

religious elements are as unacceptable as any other potentially objectionable content, such as explicit sexuality or nudity.[32]

The *Lucifer* protest was, at its core, attributed to an activist group for whom Lucifer cannot be separated from his Christian context, for whom portraying the Devil as a protagonist is deeply troubling theologically and morally. That group, One Million Moms, found itself fighting against an industry mentality in which the Devil is not religious; he is like any other cultural character to be used for narrative and economic ends. Their petition, issued after the show was announced in development, cited the religious foundation of their protest, stating, "Fox has plans to air a new series which will glorify Satan as a caring, likable person in human flesh . . . Previews of the pilot show depict graphic acts of violence, a nightclub featuring scantily-clad women and a demon."[33] One Million Moms previously had launched similar campaigns against religiously themed shows on both broadcast and cable, including *666 Park Avenue* (ABC, 2014), an hour-long drama that included diabolic pacts and interference in the lives of those living in a New York high-rise, and *Impastor* (TVLand, 2015-), a comedy about a con-man pretending to be the new pastor for a small town. One Million Moms also has campaigned regularly against other types of representations, including depictions of LGBT characters and shows that they deem inappropriate.[34] In other words, this conservative activist group doesn't just target television featuring religious content. However, the fact that they include series featuring religious characters and storylines in their protests supports the idea that such representations prove distasteful because they are antithetical to middlebrow (or at least an extreme example of middlebrow taste boundaries) tastes that the protest group represents. Thus, paradoxically, when *Lucifer* became a target of this group's ire, creatives further buttressed their claims that the show isn't religious and does not appeal to middlebrow viewers.

Significantly, reports about the protest drew the journalistic equivalent of amused condescension. This is evident, for example, from how *The Daily Beast* reported on the group's reaction and Gaiman's dismissiveness of them, as noted above: One Million Moms, the publication stated, "is upset about this TV show because of course it is."[35] It is in fact the case that the show's creators were trying to humanize the Devil in a way that could obviously seem both blasphemous and dangerous to believing Christians. But such representations are not new – there have been a number of sympathetic fictional portrayals of Satan from at least Milton's *Paradise Lost* to *Little Nicky* (Brill, 2000). At San Diego Comic-Con in 2015, however, *Lucifer* showrunner, Joe Henderson explained why his show was different from such prior depictions of the Devil. He told *Hollywood Reporter* that on *Lucifer*, the Devil isn't hiding who he is, even among the laypeople, and that the series is about second chances. He said, "What I love about this show is it's a show about humanity. It's a story about redemption and I think that is just one of the most relatable things possible . . . If the Devil can be redeemed then so can all of us."[36]

While such an approach serves as an excellent hook for Lucifer as a purely literary character, Lucifer's redemption as a religious figure is far murkier theologically. Of course, that is beside the point for *Lucifer* the comic property and television show; more than a dozen years of containment strategies positioning religion in a post-Christian production context and aided by the displacement of adaptation have naturalized the idea that religious figures are merely narrative tools. *Lucifer*'s portrayal of the Devil and the subsequent protests it incited from middlebrow religious group, One Million Moms, were they not focused on the religiousness of the character, may have been used by Fox to cultivate edge for the show. For any other controversial topic, this has historically been the strategy: to use controversy to help foster success among audiences imagined as oppositional to middlebrow tastes. However, whatever

potential edge for Lucifer remains contained within the double strategies of genre and source text displacement. *Lucifer*'s successful pick-up for a second season in April 2016 illustrates both how little religious outrage plays a role in contemporary television success, even on broadcast as well as how accepted even the most blasphemous approach to religion can be – that is, as long as the approach is appropriately contained, by being reframed as merely comic book mythology.[37]

Devil as Procedural Protagonist

Lucifer's content provides a fascinating example of the post-Christian sensibility. At least in the first season so far, the show's creatives have gone out of their way to emphasize the theological aspects of the Devil figure while positioning the show as non-religious by using religion as a cultural mythology. Early episodes of the show begin by offering the Biblical origin of Lucifer – but with a twist: "In the beginning . . . The angel Lucifer was cast out of Heaven and condemned to rule Hell for all eternity. Until he decided to take a vacation…"[38] The writers spend a significant amount of time in the pilot and second episode emphasizing the protagonist's identity as the literal devil. Lucifer (Tom Ellis) introduces himself as "Lucifer Morningstar" repeatedly, just in case offering his first name is not enough. (Lucifer is a Latin translation of "morning star" and thus "the Morning Star" is another name used for Satan/Lucifer.)[39] When his brother angel, Amenadiel (D.B. Woodside), shows up within the first fifteen minutes of the pilot to try to get Lucifer to return to Hell, Lucifer responds by reiterating his own place in the Christian ur-text: "Remind *Dad* [i.e., God] that I quit Hell because I was sick and tired of playing a part in his play." The show's approach to the title character is to double-down on the potential controversy. In doing so, the creatives emphasize that they see no controversy in telling a story of humanizing redemption of the Devil. Every mention of God in the first few episodes – even a casual, passing "oh my God" – is followed by a reminder that God is an actual entity and Father

to Lucifer. The show is a true post-Christian exemplar: by considering Christianity as an American mythology, the show re-emphasizes the religiousness of those elements of Christian culture that have become removed from their liturgical basis in American culture. The denial simultaneously allows renewal.

The writers and producers often appear to be overcompensating as they continually remind the audience that this is *actually* Lucifer, who possesses a purely religious—as opposed to vaguely supernatural—origin for his powers. Almost every non-diegetic song used in the soundtrack explicitly names Lucifer or the Devil; at one point, Lucifer chooses a red apple from a fruit bowl and says, "Hello, old friend," invoking the Western art iteration of the Devil in the Garden of Eden, offering the apple of knowledge to Eve.[40] The writers use these moments like "easter eggs" are used in many superhero comic book adaptations, providing small nods to fan knowledge of the original source. Though *Lucifer* is adapted from a Vertigo comic series and there are comic-based "easter eggs," there are also persistent nods to his theological story, particularly as it has been represented in art and culture in the West since the middle ages. Notably, these strategies and reiterations of Lucifer as both the Devil and main character of the series did not appear to hurt the series' viewership ratings. At least early in its first season, *Lucifer* was top-rated in the desirable 18-49 year-olds demographic and earned solid total ratings.[41] Representation of religion has clearly not hindered the show's broadcast appeal.

From the *Hollywood Reporter* interview with showrunner Henderson, briefly outlined above, we can get a sense of the dominant narrative constructed about the show in press and marketing discourse early when the show premiered: Lucifer is a religious figure, but that that religion is as malleable and useable as literature; thus, it is removed from the religiousness and its consequences. In the second episode, a confrontation with a hypocritical street preacher and

Lucifer's first session with his therapist (Rachel Harris) are used to reiterate the show's premise and resituate the main narrative thrust of the pilot: this Lucifer is real; he considers God his Father, but is resentful of Him because he forced him into a celestial and theological role he didn't want; he is intrigued by LAPD Detective Chloe Decker (Lauren German), who is immune to his "God-given" ability to force people to confess their deepest desires; and he's beginning to feel empathy toward humanity. Lucifer's conversation with his therapist encapsulates much of this premise:

> Therapist: "So you're the Devil?"
>
> Lucifer: "Yes, Satan, Beelzebub, Old Scratch (actually, I like that one in particular). But those were the old me. These days it's just plain old Lucifer."
>
> Therapist: "And you've left Hell behind to take a vacation in Los Angeles."
>
> Lucifer: "Well, where else would I go? You don't seem too bothered by me being the Prince of Darkness."
>
> Therapist: "I'm willing to work within your metaphor. . . Last we spoke, you were bothered by feelings of humanity."

By the end of the second episode, Lucifer has embraced the changes occurring within him, even as it is hinted that the balance of good and evil will be upset even more by the Devil becoming more human than it has been by him leaving Hell. The creative team appears interested in considering the consequences of a Devil redeemed, but they consider those consequences to be to be mythological, rather than liturgical, within their narrative. This strategy of situating diegetically acknowledged religious characters within an industrial mythological frame for the narrative will likely be replicated – and expanded upon – by the soon-to-premiere *Preacher,* which promises to further capitalize on prestige notions of edginess with its dark take on

Christianity as well as its presence on a basic cable channel such as AMC, home to series such as *Mad Men* (2007-2015), *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013), and comic book predecessor, *The Walking Dead* (2010-).

ESTABLISHING CABLE APPEAL: *PREACHER*

Preacher is the most recent example of the trend of representing religion in mainstream television to appear and potentially among the first in a turning point in representation as well as industrial discourses of religion on television. Based on my knowledge of the source material, early promotional materials (see Fig. 6), and an interview with creator of the original series, Garth Ennis, *Preacher* seems likely to be among the edgiest, most envelope pushing examples in this dissertation – possibly even more challenging than Amazon's *Hand of God* (2014-), which will be explored in the next chapter. *Preacher* has the benefit of airing on AMC, a cable channel known for depicting extreme violence and explicit thematic content with the aforementioned shows such as *Breaking Bad* and *The Walking Dead.* However, the comic book source for the television adaptation is a stretch in terms of violence, sexuality, and language even for AMC. As Jordan Smith, a reporter for *Hollywood.com*, described after the pilot development was announced:

> We admit, calling *Preacher* a black comedy isn't doing it justice. It's a dark, disturbing, disgusting little comic book that redefines gallows humor, and everyone is a target for its warpath of satire: the South, the North, Heaven, Hell, and even God himself don't escape without a good lashing. A cable network like HBO, Starz, or Showtime would probably be a better fit for material with such seedy elements. Simply put, there's just no way a basic cable network like AMC is going to be able to adapt a property like *Preacher*

without a few power washes. It will be tough to do the series justice while remaining within the parameters of basic cable propriety.[42]

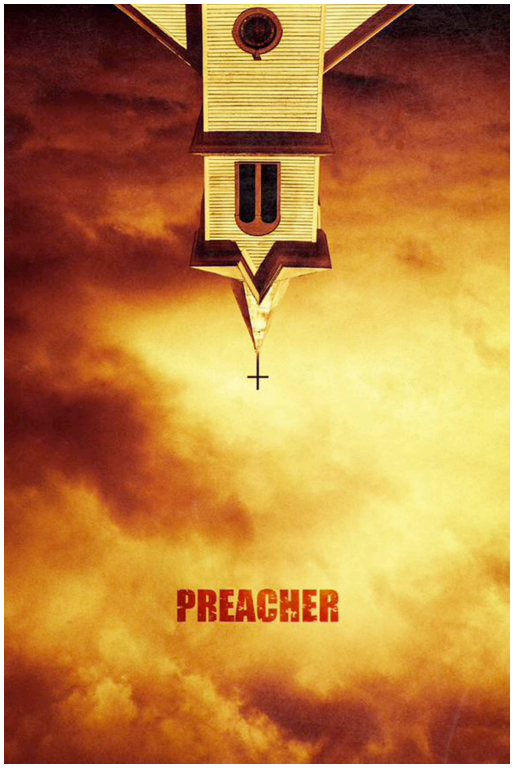

Figure 6: *Preacher* first poster

Preacher makes a fine pairing with *The Walking Dead* in relation to AMC's ongoing development of its brand in relation to the hit zombie show. *Preacher* will debut following the mid-season finale of the spinoff, *Fear the Walking Dead* (2015-), on May 22 and will take over *Fear the Walking Dead*'s timeslot in subsequent weeks.[43] The first attempt at adapting *Preacher* to television had failed in the development stages at HBO because, according to Mark Steven Johnson, the director working on the adaptation, "just too dark and too violent and too controversial."[44] That *Preacher* was too dark and controversial for HBO in 2008 but wasn't for AMC, a basic cable channel, in 2016 illustrates the great deal of change that the television

landscape has undergone in the last few years as well as the latitude granted by a runaway success like *The Walking Dead.*

Both *Preacher* and *The Walking Dead* are adaptations of violent, graphic, and thematically challenging horror comic book series. However, whereas *The Walking Dead* battles with questions of humanity's resilience or weakness in the face of inhumanity, in *Preacher* the threat comes from the living, not the undead. In *Preacher*, the villains and the violence most often originate from more worldly threats: greed, pride, toxic masculinity, xenophobia, and a general inability to accept new perspectives and ideas. The cable channel's boundaries of acceptable content are likely to challenged more by the religious narrative than they will be by the graphic content that Smith draws attention to in the passage above. Although it is too soon to say for certain at the time of this writing, *Preacher* may be the culmination of many of the themes discussed in this project thus far, a turning point in how religion can be shown and discussed by the television industry brought about by decades of containment strategy as well as larger industrial shifts further and further from middlebrow tastes and audiences. In potentially fresh and challenging ways, the show appears poised to confront—or dismiss as no longer necessary and ignore—the largely unwritten industry codes and production norms regarding when, how, and in what contexts religion can or cannot be integrated into television narratives – as well as how such textual presentations are addressed via industry discourse

AMC Is "Totally Cool" with *Preacher*'s Religious Representations

Even though the religious representations in the comic book series already have been vetted – enabling the show to represent its challenging religious narrative – the long-extant unwritten code of avoidance of religion remains intact. For example, in the *Deadline* story about the series' pick-up for an episode first season, slated to premiere in May 2016, president of

original programming for AMC and Sundance TV, Joel Stillerman, provided the following quote: "Garth Ennis' *Preacher* is, above all, about great characters – something we look for in all of our series. . . The fact that it is also darkly funny, has some great supernatural elements, and takes us on an incredible adventure is just the icing on the cake."[45]

While Stillerman may be referring to the fact that one of the supporting characters is a British vampire (Joe Gilgun), the main supernatural elements of the series originate in the blasphemous copulation between an angel and a demon that creates the being of both pure good and pure evil known as "Genesis." Genesis, in turn, gifts protagonist Jesse Custer (Dominic Cooper) with powers, specifically "the Word of God." Genesis does this by merging with Jesse, which allows Jesse's sense of morality to guide the power of Genesis. The comic book arc involves Jesse and friends traveling across America in search of God, who left Heaven as soon as Genesis was born.[46]

While these elements certainly are supernatural in the basic sense of the term, in the context of the Hollywood television industry, supernatural serves as a catch-all phrase that is vague enough to encompass all things fantastic. Moreover, when it comes to religiously themed narratives on television, "supernatural" is often the coded term for dealing with God, angels, and the like within the bounds of mythology.[47] The use of the word supernatural by Stillerman – the network executive in charge of the decision to put *Preacher* on cable television – is telling. Supernatural indicates that *Preacher*'s approach to its religious themes will likely not be that different from *Supernatural*'s or *Dominion*'s use of angels and God. Jesse Custer's role as a preacher will likely be treated respectfully, but that his path to, struggle with, and spiritual value gained from his vocation will likely not even get as much narrative attention as Matt Murdock's beliefs in *Daredevil* (discussed below). The use of "supernatural" in industry discourses suggests

that there is still a hesitancy around discussing religion as presented in dramas on television. This hesitancy in industry discourse is evident *even* in a show called *Preacher*, which is based on a comic book series that has long ago crossed those boundaries and thus mitigated the risk associated with controversially depicting religion.

At least at the time of this writing, the industrial discourse around the television adaptation has been very clearly oriented toward fans of the comic book and an engagement with claims of fidelity. In March of 2014, Seth Rogen and Evan Goldberg attended Austin's South by Southwest film festival to promote their infamously controversial (to the point of inciting global political problems due to its portrayal of North Korea and its dictator) film, *The Interview* (Rogen and Goldberg, 2014). They had recently been announced as the writers and producers for the *Preacher* pilot along with *Breaking Bad* producer and soon-to-be *Preacher* showrunner, Sam Catlin, and thus were asked about the long-awaited adaptation. The series' development only had recently been announced and it was apparently on the minds of interviewers. In one interview, Goldberg emphasized fidelity, saying:

> We just had a meeting with AMC and Garth Ennis, who's the writer, and we all kind of seemed to agree that we're gonna stay as true to the comic as we can. We need to change some stuff but we're not gonna change much, I hope. We're just gonna do a little more of the preamble instead of doing flashbacks and restructure how we dole out the information a little, but we're gonna [do the] same characters, same story, same ending. We're gonna try to stick to *Preacher* as best we can. [*sic*, throughout][48]

In an effort to avoid alienating the upscale fan audience of the original comic, Goldberg reiterates four times in as many sentences that fidelity to the original comic is their primary goal. He doesn't explicitly discuss the religious aspects of the material, but they implied in his promise

not to deviate from the "same story" of the comic books. With regard to the ongoing industry narrative, what is most important is the repeated emphasis that AMC knows what the property is and isn't trying to change it. This is distinct from the industry discourses that circulated surrounding NBC's adaptation of *Constantine*.

In another interview conducted during the 2014 festival, Eric Vespe of *Ain't It Cool News* (AICN), an Austin-based, genre-focused fan and news website, interviewed producers Goldberg and Rogen and also asked about *Preacher*. The interview concludes with the two reiterating the claims of fidelity. Rogen said the tone they employ in the show is "directly influenced by the *Preacher* graphic novels;" Goldberg emphasized their own relationship to the series as fans as well as their respect for the comic book's writer, Ennis.[49] Both claimed Garth Ennis "as one of [their] greatest influences."[50] Ennis was not ignorant to *Preacher*'s controversy nor its appeal. Ennis admitted of the comic book series: "I can see why people like it, but if it had fallen flat I wouldn't have been remotely surprised either—I'd have concluded that it was too far out there, too weird for most people to accept. And I think that applies to TV and movie interest as well – most people go "huh?" but there's always been a steady level of curiosity."[51] That curiosity, especially among those who did like the comics, continued as the development of the show unfolded through popular and trade press in 2014 and 2015.

During the AICN interview, Vespe, a self-proclaimed fan of the comics, posed some direct questions about the adaptation, saying "My biggest fear is the weirdness isn't going to make it through the system," to which Goldberg responded, "Wrong. The weirdness is in."[52] This emphasis on "weirdness" harkens to the similar characterization of Vertigo comics, implying fidelity. Goldberg went on to say, "We went into AMC last week with Garth Ennis and I've never felt like a studio or network was more on the same page with us. We pitched them and they

said, 'Perfect! That's exactly what we wanted to hear. No notes.'" Rogen added, "It seems like the language is going to be the most restrictive thing, but that I'm not worried about . . .the religious stuff, they're totally cool with. The violence, they're totally cool with. The nudity is hard, but we can find ways around that. Overall, it was one of the best meetings I've ever had, honestly."[53]

Although Rogen said that AMC was "totally cool" with the religious elements, when I asked Garth Ennis about his sense of how *Preacher*'s religious storyline would evolve for television based on his initial meetings, sitting in on some writing sessions and the season outline, he responded:

> I think they're leading up to some of the religious elements rather than stating them plainly from the get-go, but that may be as much to do with the overall plan as it is to do with anyone getting nervous. They apparently want to get 5-6 seasons out of this, and if they went with what they've got in the comic [the first volume of 7 issues {of 75 total}] they'd barely manage one and a half. So one way to lengthen the story is to spend more time on the little Texas town where Jesse starts the story, rather than being done with it in four issues as I was. I think they'll take a bit longer defining Jesse's mission before sending him out on it.[54]

Ennis' perspective added some nuance to Rogen's somewhat blasé response to the role of religion in the show, but it did not necessarily contradict Rogen's sense of AMC's content standards and "coolness" with the religious narrative. Moreover, AMC's attitude corresponded with the reaction Ennis remembered regarding the religious themes in the comic book, which he characterized thusly: "After the initial outcry, people quickly figured out whether they liked the book or not, and anyone who didn't pretty much left us alone. We had the occasional kerfuffle,

but nothing major—stuff like, 'My daddy's a Preacher and I bought him this book, and he was horrified,' but even those you could count on the fingers of one hand. No one ever had a serious go at us, tried to start any kind of movement to ban the book."[55] This sense of being controversial (and thus, edgy) without actually inciting controversy contrasts with *Lucifer*'s controversy without being controversial. *Preacher* is assumed to be boundary-pushing in terms of both general content and especially religious content, but no actual protest has yet to arise. The positioning of *Preacher* as edgy quality fare within AMC's brand has not yet used religion much in its positioning as such, but neither has it dismissed it as a potential avenue for distinction. This potential, at least at the time of this writing, leaves *Preacher* open to using its religious representation and the industrial discourse around it to cultivate edge.

Whether *Preacher*'s narrative will ultimately push past the boundaries of containment for both text and industrial discourse remains to be seen, and the risk incurred for AMC is high. The title of the show already steps over the boundary that has kept adaptations of *Hellblazer* from using the comic book's title. The potential ratings for AMC shows, at least based on ratings for *The Walking Dead*, are in line with successful broadcast television series.[56] As Goldberg said of AMC in one of the March 2014 interviews, "They've implied they want us to go on a *Walking Dead*-type path. That seems to be their strategy."[57] While these comments were all made quite early in the development process, they set the stage for how *Preacher* would continue to be constructed via marketing and journalistic materials. Namely, it was presented as a serialized horror drama in the vein of *Walking Dead*. Early discourses pointed to a show that would be incredibly violent but cautious about language and sex—the two content elements that most often have caused controversy and mobilized a conservative backlash.[58]

Significantly, *Preacher*'s creatives and AMC's executives expressed little concern about the show's presentation of religious themes and narratives. Although this is not the first instance of executives being portrayed as surprisingly sanguine regarding religion (remember Ron Moore's *Battlestar Galactica* anecdote), it is still fairly rare within this study. Garth Ennis, who sat in on some of the initial meetings and offered feedback on an early outline of the show's first season, reiterated via personal correspondence that the *The Walking Dead* was a vital influence on *Preacher*'s development: "I'm told that AMC are doing this at the optimum moment, as comic book adaptations are flourishing and the particular success of *The Walking Dead* has indicated an acceptance of non-superhero comics. So when HBO had a go with *Preacher* about eight years ago, the time wasn't right, but now the groundwork's been laid and we've got a better shot."[59] What Ennis didn't discuss about "the time being right" now is the much lower stakes in terms of ratings numbers. Even though *The Walking Dead*'s ratings often beats broadcast ratings numbers, due to AMC's different business model – as well as its ownership stake in *Preacher* – such ratings are not imperative.[60] *Preacher* fits AMC's brand at the moment and seems a clear extension of its most successful show, but it is also premiering at a time in the post-network era when a small, devoted, and affluent audience niche can sustain a show as controversial and weird as *Preacher* is likely to be.

A BRIEF NOTE ON *DAREDEVIL*

Netflix's *Daredevil* will be discussed in more depth in the next chapter, but given its relationship to these other comic book adaptations, it must be addressed briefly here. As writers for the first season of the TV series, Ruth Fletcher Gage and Christos Gage discussed the comic book arcs that they drew from in breaking that season. For the television season's main arc, they relied heavily on Frank Miller's two runs as writer for the comic book: *Daredevil: The Man*

Without Fear (1993), a take on Matt Murdock's origin story as Daredevil, and *Daredevil: Born Again* (1986), which focused more extensively on Matt's Catholicism. The latter comic book run is hailed as one of the best Daredevil stories, and its focus on Matt's religion guides much of the later comic book runs of *Daredevil,* as well as popular knowledge of him.[61] *Born Again* was source material for the *Daredevil* film adaptation (Johnson, 2003). That adaptation used a large, gothic, Catholic cathedral as the set for the climactic battle between Daredevil (Ben Affleck) and the villain Bullseye (Colin Farrell). Despite serving as the site for a significant battle, there was little discussion about Matt's Catholicism in that film. Certainly over two hours, it can be difficult to dive into religion. Over ten hours, however, it is easier to substantively engage with the topic. Indeed, in the Netflix series (2014-), Daredevil's Catholicism not only framed the show's initial trailers but also became the foundation for the first season's moral conflict. Even though only one episode out of ten focuses intently on Matt Murdock's religion, it is a component of his character that is woven throughout the series. Further, religion evolves to be the pivot around which Matt's heroic origin story revolves. The nature of his religious origin story and its implications in a streaming media content context will be analyzed in greater detail in the next chapter. Key to understanding *Daredevil's* place within the pivot toward greater religious representation on streaming media is the fact that although Matt's religion was integral to the source comic books, and thus a "gimme" for the show, it was still something that the show's writers thought they had to fight for. Even on new platforms at a time which may be a turning point for religion on television, writers remained fearful of the religious risk. What streaming outlets provided, however, was the greater sense of potential reward for pushing through those fears in the context of an innovative, "new" medium.

Conclusion

This chapter and the next one are the only ones in this project that provide case studies solely focused on programming launched during the last two years (2014-2016). To an extent, the case studies act as continuations of the boom in religious representation that has occurred since 2003. At the same time, it is possible to see in the discussion of *Constantine, Lucifer,* and particularly *Preacher* that these programs, to varying degrees, rely on the greater flexibility of religious representation that has resulted from this boom and the cultural and industrial shifts that have facilitated the more and diverse religious representations in recent years. This is the case even if the writers' discussion of their work on in religion did not show the same flexibility. With comic book adaptations, in particular, there is a surprising acceptability among executives and creatives of religious representation and the discussion of it, as long as religion continues to be contained by genre and adaptation. Consistent with shows such as *Supernatural* and *Sleepy Hollow* in the previous chapter, writers for *Constantine* and *Lucifer* both categorized their respective shows' religious representation as mythology. For writers on *Lucifer*, such a categorization walked a narrow line as they also acknowledged, at least diegetically, the religious origin and role of the character. For the shows discussed in this chapter, such mythology originated in the source texts, comic books. They used the "gimmes" granted by adapting a religious narrative from comic books to distance their own creative authority from the religious aspects. In a somewhat distinct fashion, meanwhile, AMC can be "totally cool" with the religious narrative on *Preacher* because that is part of what has created the quality and fan appeal for the comic book that they hope transfers to the television show.

While one potentially could look at the religious representations in *Lucifer* and *Constantine* in relation to the preachy broadcast mode of the 1990s and think that the television industry has experienced a colossal, industry-wide shift to get here from there, such perceptions

must be qualified by the still dominant hesitation displayed by writers regarding religion. *Preacher,* however, does potentially mark a shift in both representation and creative discourses about religion, acknowledging it and moving close to using it as a way to cultivate edge. *Preacher*'s potential as an example of the long-delayed turning point in these legacy practices is, as of the time of writing, still only a potential. On streaming platforms, however, two shows, *Hand of God* and *Daredevil*, have represented religion differently as a result of creatives pushing beyond the self-imposed boundaries of religion's riskiness. Those shows are the focus of the next chapter.

---

[1] To a lesser extent, this is also true of *Friday Night Lights, Battlestar Galactica,* and *The Leftovers*, but as novels and an adaptation of an older television show, the niche audience targeting and source text (lack of legitimacy) for comic books is unique.
[2] Simone Murray, *The Adaptation Industry* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 4-5.
[3] Ibid., 22-23.
[4] Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 6.
[5] Elisavet Ioannidou, "Adapting Superhero Comics for the Big Screen: Subculture for the Masses," *Adaptation* 6, no. 2 (August 1, 2013): 230–38,
[6] Tom Spurgeon, "The Comics Reporter," *The Comics Reporter*, February 7, 2014, http://www.comicsreporter.com/index.php/something_i_completely_missed_about_that_preacher_tv_project/; Dave Itzkoff, "Comics' Mother of 'the Weird Stuff' Is Moving On," *The New York Times*, May 29, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/30/books/comics-mother-of-the-weird-stuff-is-moving-on.html.
[7] For such a study, see Alisa Perren's forthcoming book as well as Roz Kaveney, *Superheroes!: Capes and Crusaders in Comics and Films* (London ; New York: I. B. Tauris, 2008); Liam Burke, *The Comic Book Film Adaptation: Exploring Modern Hollywood's Leading Genre* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2015).
[8] Dave Itzkoff, "Comics' Mother."
[9] Christophe Dony, "The rewriting ethos of the Vertigo imprint: critical perspectives on memory-making and canon formation in the American comics field," *Comicalités. Études de culture graphique*, April 18, 2014, http://comicalites.revues.org/1918; Julia Round, "'Is This a Book?' DC Vertigo and the Redefinition of Comics in the 1990s," in *The Rise of the American Comics Artist: Creators and Contexts*, ed. Paul Williams and James Lyons (Jackson [Miss.]: University Press of Mississippi, 2010), 16.
[10] Itzkoff, "Comics' Mother."

[11] Alisa Perren, "The Trick of the Trades: Media Industry Studies and the American Comic Book Industry," in *Production Studies, The Sequel,* eds. Miranda Banks, Bridget Conor, and Vicki Mayer, (New York: Rutledge, 2016), 232.
[12] Cynthia Littleton, "NBC Execs on Broadcast Vs. Cable, Emmy Awards, Thursday Night Struggles," *Variety*, July 13, 2014, http://variety.com/2014/tv/news/nbc-renews-americas-got-talent-ninja-warrior-last-comic-standing-1201261837/.
[13] Rick Kissell, "Ratings: Fox's 'The X-Files' Tops Monday in Demo, Boosts 'Lucifer' to Hot Premiere," *Variety*, January 26, 2016, http://variety.com/2016/tv/news/ratings-the-x-files-monday-premiere-fox-lucifer-hot-1201688915/; Rick Kissell, "NBC's 'Constantine' Solid in Premiere Opposite World Series," *Variety*, October 25, 2014, http://variety.com/2014/tv/ratings/nbcs-constantine-solid-in-premiere-opposite-world-series-1201339131/.
[14] See: Amanda D. Lotz, *The Television Will Be Revolutionized* (NYU Press, 2007); Todd Gitlin, *Inside Prime Time: With a New Introduction*, 1st ed. (University of California Press, 2000).
[15] Brian Lowry, "TV Review: 'Constantine,'" *Variety*, October 22, 2014, http://variety.com/2014/tv/reviews/tv-review-constantine-1201331412/; Steven Schneider, "Why NBC's 'Constantine' Will Make You Forget about Keanu Reeves," *Tech Times*, October 24, 2014, http://www.techtimes.com/articles/18659/20141024/why-nbcs-constantine-will-make-you-forget-about-keanu-reeves.htm; Roger Ebert, "Constantine Movie Review & Film Summary (2005)," *RogerEbert*.com, accessed April 16, 2016, http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/constantine-2005.
16. Garth Ennis, personal correspondence, May 1, 2015.
[17] Diane Haithman, "'Grimm' Producers Consider What Makes A 'Breakout Hit' And The Friday Night Curse: TCA," *Deadline*, January 6, 2013, http://deadline.com/2013/01/grimm-nbc-tca-david-greenwalt-jim-kouf-397819/; Brian Lowry, "TV Review: 'Constantine,'" *Variety*, October 22, 2014, http://variety.com/2014/tv/reviews/tv-review-constantine-1201331412/; Jacob Bryant, "David Goyer Doesn't Think 'Constantine' Should Have Ended Up At NBC," *Variety*, October 20, 2015, http://variety.com/2015/tv/news/constantine-david-goyer-nbc-arrow-cameo-1201622606/.
[18] Nellie Andreeva, "'Constantine' Cancelled By NBC, Will It Find New Life Elsewhere?," *Deadline*, May 8, 2015, http://deadline.com/2015/05/constantine-cancelled-nbc-life-elsewhere-1201423289/.
[19] James Hibberd, "'Constantine' Team on Why NBC Character Isn't Bisexual, Smoking Cigarettes," *EW.com*, July 13, 2014, http://www.ew.com/article/2014/07/13/constantine-bisexual-smoking.
[20] See also: Jacob Bryant, "David Goyer Doesn't Think 'Constantine' Should Have Ended Up At NBC," *Variety*, October 20, 2015, http://variety.com/2015/tv/news/constantine-david-goyer-nbc-arrow-cameo-1201622606/.
[21] Mark Verheiden, telephone interview, February 2, 2015.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Christina Savage, "Chuck versus the Ratings: Savvy Fans and 'Save Our Show' Campaigns," *Transformative Works and Cultures* 15, no. 0 (November 12, 2013); Oscar Williams, "Social Engagement Now More Important than TV Ratings, Says Fremantle Boss," *The Guardian*, January 21, 2015, sec. Media Network, http://www.theguardian.com/media-network/2015/jan/21/social-media-engagement-tv-ratings-fremantle; Alan Sepinwall, "Farewell

to 'Togetherness,' a Rare Peak TV Cancellation," *HitFix*, accessed April 16, 2016, http://www.hitfix.com/whats-alan-watching/farewell-to-togetherness-a-rare-peak-tv-cancellation; Tim Goodman, "Tim Goodman: How to Not Get Canceled in the New World of Television," *The Hollywood Reporter*, October 8, 2015, http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/bastard-machine/tim-goodman-how-not-get-830807.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Ibid.

[26] "The Saint of Last Resorts," *Constantine*.

[27] Mark Verheiden, telephone interview, February 2, 2015.

[28] Ibid.

[29] For more information on how crime procedurals have used religion for spectacle, see: Hunting, Kyra. "Genre's Disciplining Discourses: Cultural Difference and Contemporary Genre Television." Order No. 3725306, The University of Wisconsin - Madison, 2014. http://ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/1722488000?accountid=7118.

[30] James Hibberd, "'Constantine' Team on Why NBC Character Isn't Bisexual, Smoking Cigarettes | EW.com," July 13, 2014, http://www.ew.com/article/2014/07/13/constantine-bisexual-smoking.

[31] Neil Gaiman, "'One Million Moms' Says New Fox TV Series 'Lucifer' 'Mocks the Bible,' Starts Petition Urging for Show's Cancellation," Tumblr, *Neil-Gaiman.tumblr.com*, (May 29, 2015), http://neil-gaiman.tumblr.com/post/120223970701/one-million-moms-says-new-fox-tv-series.

[32] Holt, Jennifer. "*NYPD Blue*: Content Regulation." In *How To Watch Television*, edited by Ethan Thompson and Jason Mittell, 271–80. New York: NYU Press, 2013; Perlman, Allison Joyce. "Reforming the Wasteland: Television, Reform, and Social Movements, 1950-2004," 2008. https://repositories.lib.utexas.edu/handle/2152/3247.

[33] Asawin Suebsaeng, "One Million Moms Promise Devil of a Time for 'Lucifer' TV Show," *The Daily Beast*, June 7, 2015, http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/06/07/one-million-moms-promise-devil-of-a-time-for-lucifer-tv-show.html.

[34] Kissell, Rick. "ABC Family's 'The Fosters' Surges in Second Week; Did Controversy Help?." *Variety*, June 11, 2013. http://variety.com/2013/tv/news/abc-familys-the-fosters-surges-in-second-week-did-controversy-help-1200495502/; Marechal, A. J. "Olympics Viewers to Get Taste of 'New Normal.'" *Variety*, August 11, 2012. http://variety.com/2012/tv/news/olympics-viewers-to-get-taste-of-new-normal-9193/.

[35] Ibid.

[36] Kate Stanhope, "Comic-Con: 'Lucifer' Series Preview," *The Hollywood Reporter*, July 10, 2015, http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/live-feed/comic-con-lucifer-series-preview-807888.

[37] Nellie Andreeva, "'Lucifer', 'Rosewood' Renewed For Season 2 By Fox, Who's Still On the Bubble There?," *Deadline*, April 7, 2016, http://deadline.com/2016/04/lucifer-rosewood-renewed-season-2-fox-sleepy-hollow-grandfathered-the-grinder-new-girl-1201733778/.

[38] "Pilot," *Lucifer*.

[39] Daniel B. Wallace, "Is 'Lucifer' the Devil in Isaiah 14:12? - The KJV Argument against Modern Translations," *Bible.org*, March 22, 2010, https://bible.org/article/lucifer-devil-isaiah-1412-kjv-argument-against-modern-translations.

[40] "Lucifer, Stay. Good Devil," *Lucifer*.

[41] Rick Kissell, "Ratings: Fox's 'X-Files,' 'Lucifer' Down in Week Two, Still Top Night in Demo," *Variety*, February 2, 2016, http://variety.com/2016/tv/news/ratings-fox-x-files-lucifer-down-in-week-two-1201694762/.
[42] Jordan Smith, "Our Thoughts, Hopes, and Worries About Seth Rogen's 'Preacher' Series," *Hollywood.com*, February 7, 2014, http://www.hollywood.com/news/tv/56778818/seth-rogen-evan-goldeberg-preacher-amc.
[43] Denise Petski, "'Preacher' AMC Drama Series Gets Premiere Date," Deadline, March 14, 2016, http://deadline.com/2016/03/preacher-amc-drama-series-premiere-date-1201719886/.
[44] Rob Allstetter, "Mark Steven Johnson: No *Preacher* on HBO," *Comics Continuum*, August 25, 2008, http://www.comicscontinuum.com/stories/0808/25/index.htm?loc=interstitialskip; Sciretta, Peter. "HBO Kills *Preacher* Television Series - /Film." *Slashfilm*, August 26, 2008. http://www.slashfilm.com/hbo-kills-preacher-television-series/.
[45] Nellie Andreeva, "'Preacher' Picked Up To Series By AMC," *Deadline*, September 9, 2015, http://deadline.com/2015/09/preacher-picked-up-series-amc-1201519616/.
[46] *Preacher* vol. 1
[47] Paige Albiniak, "Broadcast Networks Show Their Otherworldly Side; Are NBC's New Hits Part of a Sppiritual Awakening, or Just Good TV?," *Broadcasting & Cable*, April 25, 2005, LexisNexis Academic; Nellie Andreeva, "It's a 'Miracle' for Minear, Holland, ABC," *HollywoodReporter.com*, August 28, 2007.
[48] Adam Chitwood, "Evan Goldberg Talks AMC PREACHER TV Series, THE INTERVIEW, and CONSOLE WARS," *Collider*, March 9, 2014, http://collider.com/preacher-tv-news-evan-goldberg/.
[49] Eric Vespe, "Quint Talks Neighbors, Deleted Scenes and Preacher with Seth Rogen and Evan Goldberg!," *Aint It Cool News*, March 12, 2014, http://www.aintitcool.com/node/66516.
[50] Ibid.
[51] Garth Ennis, personal correspondence, May 1, 2015.
[52] Ibid.
[53] Ibid.
[54] Ibid.
[55] Ibid.
[56] Dominic Patten, "'The Walking Dead' Ratings: More Cable Records In Live+3 Results," *Deadline*, October 17, 2014, http://deadline.com/2014/10/the-walking-dead-premiere-ratings-new-cable-record-season-5-853406/.
[57] Ennis, correspondence.
[58] Johnson, Ted. "New Campaign Addresses Violence in Media." *Variety*, February 27, 2013. http://variety.com/2013/tv/news/new-campaign-addresses-violence-in-media-820084/; "Valenti: TV Reducing Violence." *Variety*, November 8, 1993. http://variety.com/1993/tv/columns/valenti-tv-reducing-violence-115701/.
[59] Garth Ennis, personal correspondence, May 1, 2015.
[60] Patten, "The Walking Dead."
[61] Abraham Reisman, "What Daredevil Comics Should You Read When You're Done With the Netflix Series?," *Vulture*, April 11, 2015, http://www.vulture.com/2015/04/what-daredevil-comics-should-you-read-now.html.

Chapter Six Not Ready for Prime-time Religion: Amazon and Netflix Streaming Digital Content

New Television, Old Ideologies

So far, this study has explored the paradox of increased and more varied religious representation on television dramas since 2003 simultaneous with the persistent religious hesitation among creatives working on those shows through a range of forms, eras, and outlets. This chapter turns to the newest iteration of television, streaming platforms, to see whether patterns have – or have not – changed with the emergence of new technologies, shifting modes of consumption, and ongoing transformations in business models. One of the greatest changes the television industry has undergone since the advent of cable in the 1980s is the rise of streaming platforms in the twenty-first century. Like cable previously, streaming outlets such as Amazon, Netflix, and Hulu initially represented a change in how content was consumed. They, like cable outlets such as HBO, Nickelodeon, and TBS, primarily focused on licensing evergreen content rather than financing or distributing original programming.[1] This was especially the case with more expensive dramatic programming.

Eventually, as competition for old content became more intense, prices continued to rise for such content, and they sought to differentiate themselves from their competitors, these streaming platforms began to adapt certain legacy television models and practices to their own purposes. Beginning in 2012, services such as Amazon and Netflix began licensing original content to compete with established outlets such as HBO, Showtime, and AMC. In the last few years, content for these platforms generally has been considered equal to broadcast, cable, and premium content in terms of production quality.[2] The rise of streaming platforms occurred as

these services mixed old approaches to television (e.g., targeting upscale and fan audiences, using established properties to gain viewers, positioning themselves as not-TV by representing violence, sex, language, etc. as well as high-end stylistics) with newer strategies such as intense serialization to promote binge watching and, significantly, in the case of Amazon's *Hand of God* (2014-) using edgy representation of religion to distinguish itself. The pursuit of quality audiences through controversy and branding content as "not-TV" were two of key legacy practices to be translated and revised for streaming platforms.[3]

These streaming services often established themselves by trying to make noise, that is, gain attention in the industry, with the press, and with potential viewers by highlighting their novelty, innovation, and originality. Amazon and Netflix made noise in 2014 and 2015, for example, with a range of programming (from award-winners like *Transparent* [Amazon, 2014-] and *Orange is the New Black* [Netflix, 2013-] to less well-received programs like *Marco Polo* [Netflix, 2014-] and *Mad Dogs* [Amazon, 2015-]). Two particular streaming programs provided unique approaches to religion that expanded on early modes of representation and tested the boundaries of religion's containment both in representation and creatives' discourse.[4] For Amazon, the most prominent show to do so was *Hand of God*, about a recently born-again judge who has potentially divine visions guiding him to find and exact revenge on the people who had hurt his son. *Hand of God* is unique in terms of religion: it is the only show in my study thus far that has made it through a season and to public consumption and been able to address religion in an edgy fashion. For Netflix, the show to engage most directly with religion thus far is *Daredevil* (2015-), which, as noted in the previous chapter, is about the origin and evolution of blind lawyer (and superhero vigilante) Matt Murdock, aka Daredevil. *Daredevil* gained attention from journalists after its release for representing religion as a positive force in Matt Murdock's life.[5]

Religion serves a guiding principle in the development of the series, though it was not evident in the show's initial marketing.

Despite being framed by journalistic and industrial discourses of technological, narrative, and industrial newness, these streaming dramas, and in particular, *Daredevil*, remain shaped in the writers' rooms by the legacy ideologies and practices of self-policing regarding religious representation. However, the borderlines formed in the 1990s have become more flexible and permeable in the last year, particularly for shows on these new outlets. The practices of containment on these two streaming dramas have not proven to be as limiting as they have in the previous case studies discussed in prior chapters. The writers for these shows have tested and expanded the boundaries for discussing religion and representing it on television because they felt they had more room to experiment within their distinctive industrial context. The sense that television itself was changing in light of streaming platforms' influence on the industry aided in the potential for 2015-2016 to mark a shift in both religious representation (with both *Hand of God* and *Preacher* [AMC, 2016-] potentially serving as examples) and how creatives understand that work in the context of the television industry's ideology and culture. For example, writers for *Daredevil* told me they had expected Netflix and Marvel to push back on an overtly Christian scene they wrote. They were surprised at the lack of executive problems with religion in much the same way Ronald D. Moore was in 2003 when his assumption of the undesirability of religious representation was contradicted by an executive at the Sci Fi Channel. Yet for as much as the streaming outlets perpetuate a discourse of newness—and for as much as such newness does in fact bear out in many aspects of their productions, including with religious representations—the ideology that shapes the writers on these streaming dramas has changed very little from 2003. Religion remains perceived as ideologically risky for writers, much as it

was with *Battlestar Galactica, Supernatural*, and other case studies discussed earlier. However, on streaming platforms, the discourse of newness grants them enough symbolic capital to begin to push through that ideology. The degree to which that ideology can or will continue to shift – both on streaming platforms and on linear outlets such as AMC with *Preacher* – remains to be seen.

Many of the strategies for navigating use and representation of religion in television discussed in earlier chapters are evident in shows created for streaming platforms. Despite streaming platforms' collective reputation as innovative television makers and risk-takers, similar in kind but greater in degree to some linear television outlets like AMC and HBO, the writers and producers *Hand of God* and *Daredevil* remained wary of executives' reaction to their use of religion in the shows' narratives. These writers adhered to the unwritten norms of television that religion, particularly the specifics of belief, remains a dangerous topic if you want to appeal to any kind of audience demographic. However, the hesitation that these writers discussed appeared during the shows' development and then was overcome, as was the writers' hesitation in discussing their work as religious. The writers for both the shows that comprise the case studies for this chapter discussed with me the hesitation and fear they felt even as they wrote their religious stories, and ultimately, as their shows gained notice for their religious narratives. Such hesitation was consistent with that expressed to me by writers for linear outlets. But such hesitation began to wane when the shows appeared on their platforms and gained recognition and praise for their religious representation, among other narrative and stylistic elements. *Daredevil* eventually embraced the praise it had garnered for uniquely representing religion; in fact, Netflix employed a marketing strategy for its second season that emphasized religious framing (see Figs 7 and 8).[6] Amazon, meanwhile, used *Hand of God* to buttress its brand as a "conversation

starter"; the retailer-cum-streaming service aggressively highlighted its religious representations as edgy, becoming the only outlet to employ such a strategy in this study.

Figure 7: Screenshot, *Daredevil* season 2 trailer, depicting first season events through church frescoes

Figure 8: *Daredevil* season 2 character poster compared to Rubens' St. Sebastian[7]

Although both shows increasingly embraced a reliance on religion in their marketing materials, there are notable differences industrially between the two platforms. When it comes to religion, the creative ideology driving Netflix's *Daredevil* was far less new than the service on which it appeared. Amazon, in contrast, has mined religion for whatever dramatic stories it offers without fear of offending people or courting controversy. It has done so in order to help them build a brand and distinguish themselves from Netflix. Amazon's strategy *is* unique but only in terms of its application within the framework of presenting religion on American dramas. The strategy of positioning shows as edgy is not new: this long has been a containment strategy for non-religious objectionable material, such as sex and violence, used by broadcast networks in the

1980s and early 1990s.[8] Much as their broadcast and cable predecessors did with violent and sexually explicit content, the creatives and executives working on *Hand of God* consciously have used religion to cultivate edge.

The following sections provide the context for understanding original programming on streaming television. Included are overviews of the three main original content producers as of 2016: Netflix, Amazon, and Hulu. After this survey, I then discuss Netflix and Amazon's respective audience targets and examine how they build on the models of quality and fan audiences that have been employed by those involved with the shows discussed in previous chapters. The streaming outlets' imagining of their audiences as upscale – or their pursuit of an upscale demographic – both informs the ways in which legacy practices of containment still operate on *Daredevil* and *Hand of God*'s writers, producers, and executives and works to legitimate streaming sites as television outlets worthy of quality praise. Once achieved, as Netflix has done, the strategy turns more fully to efforts (that had been ongoing simultaneous with but less discussed than legitimation programming) to diversify rapidly into other forms of content. The legitimation of their brands through original programming is key to understanding how streaming dramas navigate the risk—both textually and among creatives—in representing religion. This negotiation is especially fraught for Netflix, given its dominance within the streaming sector of the television industry.

STREAMING TELEVISION'S RECENT HISTORY

Although original scripted streaming content has been a part of the entertainment media landscape for more than a decade, with prominent examples including *The Guild* (YouTube/XBox, 2007-2013) and *Doctor Horrible's Sing-along Blog* (Whedon, 2008), it is only in the 2010s that web-first content gained enough traction to approach the status and production

values of broadcast and cable television content. As noted above, the three main competitors for streaming television dominance in the twenty-first century, at least up to 2016, are: Netflix, Amazon, and Hulu. All are streaming services (including, websites and apps) that offer subscription-based access both to their original content as well as their massive libraries of licensed television shows and movies.

Netflix, Amazon, and Hulu: Business Models

Netflix began as a DVD-by-mail rental service in the late 1990s, transitioned to a subscription-based DVD rental model in the 2000s, added streaming video as an option in 2007, and began licensing original content in 2012.[9] Although the technology of streaming was new as of the late 2000s, there are precedents to it in terms of licensing, acquisitions, distribution, and consumption. In tracing the history of Netflix, Chuck Tryon points out that the model for Netflix's self-positioning within the market replicates what HBO has been doing since the 1990s. He argues, "Netflix, like HBO, has sought to attract new subscribers and to retain current users through a strategy in which it promoted itself as a superior form of entertainment to a version of standard, or linear, television that really hasn't existed for some time."[10] Regarding Netflix's claims of quality within its industrial history, Tryon concludes, "Netflix increasingly casts itself as participating in the reinvention of television and in the cultivation of new modes of TV storytelling."[11] Like HBO, Netflix aligns its brand identity, at least in part, with quality television and its quality TV's textual possibilities. Not surprisingly, this also means that Netflix perpetuates the legacy production practices of containment for religious representation that have been affecting television distribution channels across the television landscape for two decades. Moreover, Netflix competes with HBO, Showtime, and other linear platforms in bidding for content from the same suppliers of creatives, but it gains the advantage in its relative newness,

enabling those creatives to navigate what Netflix—along with other financiers of the programming—will allow.

More recently, Netflix's debt to older television models has become explicit as it has named itself a "global Internet TV network." At the 2016 International Consumer Electronics Show, for example, Netflix Co-Founder Reed Hastings described what being a global TV network meant to Netflix: "With this launch, consumers around the world -- from Singapore to St. Petersburg, from San Francisco to Sao Paulo—will be able to enjoy TV shows and movies simultaneously—no more waiting. With the help of the Internet, we are putting power in consumers' hands to watch whenever, wherever and on whatever device."[12] While simultaneity of consumption was also the claim of the first television networks in America and the reasoning behind the network-affiliate technological and industrial model of television, Hastings was describing something different here: *simultaneous access*. This access was Netflix's promise—made possible primarily through its original productions, not its library content. The rebranding of Netflix as a global network is an effort to grow their subscriber base globally. The lure of new subscribers is based on the value added by original content, which makes their original programming's ability to gain buzz central to their business model. This is not unlike HBO's longstanding business model, made even more so by HBO's recent launch of their own standalone streaming platform: HBO Now.

In recent years, Amazon Prime Instant Video (henceforth, Amazon Prime) has borrowed heavily from Netflix's successful acquisitions and licensing practices. However, Amazon's origins were in video sales rather than rental. Amazon Prime's streaming service started with the online retailer's shift into video on demand downloads (like Apple's iTunes store) in 2008. The service shortly thereafter added streaming video on demand for purchase (similar to cable's on

demand services). In 2011, Amazon Video On Demand changed its name to Amazon Instant Video and offered its Prime subscribers access to a limited amount of content from its streaming video library.[13] Unlike Netflix, which offers access to its full library to subscribers but provides no options for streaming rental or purchase beyond that library, Amazon Prime has created a tiered system. For example, Prime subscribers can buy a DVD and get it shipped to them for free within two days; they can rent or purchase a film, television episode, or complete season and have it instantly available for streaming on their devices; or they can watch any of the Prime video library instantly for "free" (with their $99/year subscription to Prime). Additionally, Amazon Prime Instant Video works to add value to Amazon's business model by drawing subscribers to their multiples services (digital books, streaming music, free two-day shipping) to multiple purchases, including those beyond digital media.[14] This abundance of options makes unlimited entertainment available to consumers, advertised through a discourse of openness intended to rival Netflix. However, Amazon occupies a secondary place in the market, far behind Netflix in terms of number of subscribers.[15] The incentive to take risks and cultivate edge in Amazon Studios' original programming is a strategy developed to counter Netflix's market dominance as well as incentivize Amazon Prime subscriptions.

Hulu is unique among these three streaming sites in that it arose not out of DVD rental or purchasing paradigms, but instead from a partnership among the television networks of media conglomerates, NBC Universal and Fox, to have more control over their own content and access.[16] Hulu, like Netflix and Amazon, offers movies that it has licensed (e.g., Criterion films) as well as television streaming reruns from its partnerships. Hulu's current brand focus is on providing an online streaming platform for currently airing shows, supplemented by two different subscription tiers (subscriptions with ads or without ads).[17] While the latter option

brings Hulu's proffered viewing experience more in line with what Netflix and Amazon offer, Hulu still clings to the legacy television distribution practice of releasing episodes week-to-week instead of a season at a time, likely due to its closer partnership with the terrestrial networks. Hulu has also attempted to cling to its legacy partnerships with these networks through its programming and business model. Although Hulu's new series, *The Path* (2016-), about a family joining a mysterious religious sect/cult as characteristics that would make it a good fit for this study, the timing of its appearance on the service put it beyond my scope.

Original Television Production

Netflix's first original drama (a term used to denote exclusive licensing rights more than production financing) was the Norwegian detective series *Lilyhammer* (2012), distributed as a full season without commercial breaks. Its premiere was noteworthy enough to garner the attention of *The New York Times,* but forgotten by many who consider *House of Cards* as Netflix's first.[18] Shortly thereafter, Hulu premiered a drama series called *Battleground* (2012), a political mockumentary, and aired episodes weekly and with commercial breaks, similar to how linear television has released its content for decades.[19] Though both *Lilyhammer* and *Battleground* received limited attention from journalists and critics, Netflix ultimately was more successful in its initial forays into original programming than Hulu. This early moment could have led to a different landscape for streaming original content if Hulu's weekly-episode approach had been the more successful one. Following this first series, Netflix developed a two-fold strategy for gaining industrial and cultural prominence: releasing all episodes of a season at once and aiming for upscale audiences, critical attention, and awards, right out of the HBO playbook. With its next dramatic series, *House of Cards* (2013-), Netflix quickly ascended to become the dominant streaming company and brand, discursively built on quality dramas while

Netflix was also targeting as many demographics as possible with its original programming. The quality brand, however, is the main influence on its programing's approach to religion and thus strategy of focus regarding Netflix in this chapter.

With the political drama *House of Cards*, Netflix not only lured a major movie star, Kevin Spacey, to its programming stable, thereby helping it to establish its *bona fides,* but it also took advantage of its ability to release an entire season simultaneously. Whereas *Lilyhammer* applied episodic elements of the procedural detective genre, *House of Cards* was intensely serialized to take advantage of its unique distribution format. As a result, it became the series that established streaming outlets as viable competition with traditional television outlets, be they broadcast, cable, or premium. As of this writing, Netflix continues to be the dominant outlet for original streaming content, with Hulu not yet gaining the same traction with an original series, and late-comer Amazon Prime just beginning to gain attention in terms of content.[20] Amazon Prime acquires its original content from Amazon Studios, which was founded in 2010, but didn't produce original television series for Amazon Prime until 2013.[21] The first series that Amazon Studios produced were comedies and children's programs, including *Alpha House* (2013-2014), *Betas* (2013-2014), and *Annedroids* (2014-). Amazon Studios differentiated itself initially from Netflix and Hulu by focusing on crowdsourcing content from creators outside of the established television system.[22] Although that strategy changed after viewers and critics largely overlooked the first "season" of original programming, the focus on "visionary creators" continued as a way for Amazon Prime to differentiate its programming.[23] Amazon's more recent productions show a propensity for foregrounding its creators as visionaries – whether *Transparent*'s (2014-) Jill Soloway, *Mad Dogs'* (2015-2016) Shawn Ryan, or *Hand of God*'s Ben Watkins. Notably, all of these creative figures previously worked extensively on linear channels; Soloway, for example,

worked for years as a writer and producer for HBO's *Six Feet Under* (2001-2005). For original content, Amazon's strategy is to find the niches less targeted by Netflix and Hulu. But Amazon—like Netflix in recent years—seeks industry validation to legitimate their outsider position.

NETFLIX AND AMAZON: AWARDS, DISCOURSES OF SUCCESS, AND BRANDING

Both Netflix and Amazon's original programming brands rely heavily on a handful of shows that have won notable awards and gained critical acclaim: most notably *Transparent, House of Cards*, and *Orange is the New Black* (Netflix, 2013-). All three shows are critical and awards darlings within the industry. Moreover, their nominations and wins at traditional industry awards ceremonies such as the Emmys serve to legitimate streaming services as sites for quality television, posed in contrast to the more "mass appeal" broadcast networks. In 2013, *House of Cards* not only won Netflix its first Emmy for best directing in a drama series but was also nominated for an Emmy for Outstanding Drama Series. As many a feature news article noted, none of the five broadcast networks earned a nomination in that category.[24] News stories about the nomination explicitly tied *House of Cards*—and Netflix—to HBO and its history as a home for quality, award-winning series. For example, Jon Weisman at *Variety* compared the nomination to the first-ever cable series nomination twenty years previous: HBO's *The Larry Sanders Show.*[25] After the awards show, T.C. Stock for *The Verge* drew yet another HBO comparison, writing:

> The Emmy nods, coming nearly 15 years after *The Sopranos* became the first cable series to earn an Emmy nomination for best television drama, signal an important validation of the internet streaming model and the company's aggressive push into original programming. Netflix has promised to create a minimum of five original programs a year, with plans to double that number in 2014, and has budgeted $300 million for shows

like *House of Cards*, *Hemlock Grove*, and *Orange Is the New Black*. Not shy about its ambitions, Netflix has said that "the goal is to become HBO faster than HBO can become us."[26]

For all that Netflix and Amazon, as HBO before them, built their brands as avenues for quality television by being not-television, the accolades garnered from their television industry peers establishes their services as tied to quality television's history. Their target audiences and how they are constructed—intelligent, connected, affluent—only reinforce that these audiences are not new. Often the same labels have been revitalized to describe the same quality and fan audiences as a way to brand an outlet as upscale, as HBO did in the 1990s. What is distinct for these streaming platforms is the addition of the notion of connectedness, that implies a certain level of technological access and engagement.

As intimated by the various ways that both Netflix and Amazon are linked in industry discourse and in their own branding, HBO's tagline of "It's not TV; it's HBO" could be applied to both streaming services as well. While both Amazon and Netflix do in part depend on HBO's strategies of distinction in a new form, they—or at least Amazon—are distinguishing themselves from the rest of television as it has been since 2003 in terms of religion. But given the potentiality of *Preacher*, discussed in the last chapter, to also present a new approach to religion on television, that distinction is not only based within these new platforms. With the rise of these services and their affordances as well as the shifting fragmentation of viewers and new business models across the television landscape and influenced by their rise, new variations on the old ideologies of religion as risk and its resulting industrial and representational containment strategies gain viability. This is not to say that production discourses have openly and fully embraced religion-as-edge or even in overt (let alone nuanced) ways. Instead, what *Hand of God*

particularly and *Daredevil* (less so) represent is this new potentiality expressed through the new television outlets that claim the highest degree of textual possibility. Even within that claim of textual possibility, the ideology that has kept religion contained for decades remains influential enough to ensure such a potential remains, for now, only a potential turning point. Fear still dominates creatives' discussions of religious representation, but *Hand of God* and *Daredevil* to a lesser extent represent shows that can arise once creatives have overcome that ideological fear and its resulting self-policing.

NETFLIX AND MARVEL: JOINING QUALITY AND FAN AUDIENCES

In April 2015, *Daredevil* became the first of five series to be made available to consumers via Netflix's exclusive partnership with Disney's Marvel Entertainment division (*Jessica Jones* [2015-], *Luke Cage* [2016-], and *Iron Fist* [not yet announced] follow). *Daredevil* represented one of the most explicit appeals made to a fan audience via Netflix's Original Productions slate. As noted earlier, *Daredevil* tells the comic book origin story of Matt Murdock (Charlie Cox), the blind lawyer and vigilante who patrols New York City's Hell's Kitchen neighborhood using his heightened senses to compensate for his lack of sight. *Daredevil* and other Netflix comic book adaptations such as *Jessica Jones* and *Luke Cage* target the fan audience that the Marvel Cinematic Universe has carefully cultivated over the last decade. As with Marvel's broadcast productions for ABC (also owned by Disney), *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* (ABC, 2013-) and *Agent Carter* (ABC, 2015-), these shows provide a means for extending the Marvel universe and provide a richer storyworld for existing fans and potentially new entry points for new viewers as well.

Netflix and Marvel's television partnership effectively merges the fan and quality audiences. The Marvel-Netflix productions take Matt Hills' declaration that "fans are always

already consumers" and amend that to the Netflix-perpetuated quality discourse: Netflix viewers are always already hailed as quality consumers.[27] This discounts the variety of other target audiences that Netflix appeals to—children (with their Kids Only profile/section), older adults (evidenced by their licensing of *Longmire* [A&E, 2012-2014; Netflix 2015-]), and middlebrow audiences (*Fuller House* [Netflix, 2016-]). Building on the HBO model as "not-TV" – meaning not "ordinary" or middlebrow fare as a discursive positioning more than business model – much of Netflix's original programming assumes the Netflix audience is a quality audience. Not only does this contingent of the audience pay to subscribe, but they also pride themselves as being different from the viewers of regular television. They see themselves as coming to this quality programming due to its high production values, complex stories and characters, as well as critical acclaim and awards. The assumptions about the quality fan audiences discussed in chapter three with regard *to Battlestar Galactica* (Sci Fi 2003-2009) and *Lost* (ABC, 2004-2011) persist with the *Daredevil* writers. More specifically, at least with regard to the Daredevil writers with whom I spoke, there was a perpetuation of the belief that the fan audience would be oppositional to religious representation unless these representations are contained within the genre. Only a vaguer spirituality would be acceptable, much as is the case with *Lost* and *Battlestar Galactica* in chapter three. These perspectives continue in part because the writers anticipate how Netflix and Marvel executives would react to religion. They preemptively contain their representations as protection against anticipated executive responses, a practice consistent with broadcast and cable era practices. But this self-policing only occurs within the writers' disclosed thinking about their religious writing. Where *Daredevil* as a case study and Netflix as an outlet differ is that their industrial positioning as new and innovative invites writers to push past the boundaries of their self-policing and try for different, slightly less contained religious representations.

RELIGION IN THE CONTEXT OF MARVEL'S BRAND: *DAREDEVIL*

With its dark cinematography, its brutal violence, and its heightened serialization, *Daredevil* ticks many edgy boxes, especially for a superhero show. Yet, consistent with the shows discussed in previous chapters, both Marvel and Netflix executives initially hesitated about the use of religion on the show.[28] Writers for the show told me that the executives worried about the potential of religion to hinder the show's success in international markets, and they worried about being seen as "disrespectful." This fear of being disrespectful is an inherent acknowledgment that television writers' rooms are seen as being dominated by non-religious creatives. Even as of 2015, these creatives still didn't know how to represent religion for religious audiences (i.e., those who might feel disrespected). This is in part because such audiences were not seen as being among TV's coveted target audiences and in part because religious representations have been ideologically contained and avoided, and thus not directly presented to mainstream audiences, for more than a decade.[29] This hesitancy is rooted in ongoing corporate assumptions (and skittishness) about depicting religion in mainstream entertainment media. This attitude persists in *Daredevil* despite the fact that religion is a key element of the show's comic book source text as well as an acknowledged and assumed element of the main character's motivation.

As writers for *Daredevil,* Ruth Fletcher Gage and Christos Gage, told me, original showrunner Drew Goddard (*Lost* [ABC, 2004-2010]*, Cabin in the Woods* [Whedon, 2012])*,* developed the show's approach to religion around the idea that "religion is a positive force" in the lives of many and in particular in the life of their version of Matt Murdock.[30] Goddard developed the series and ran the writers' room for the first few months of a thirteen-month-long writers room production. Goddard is Catholic and, the Gages said, felt that Matt's Catholicism, particularly its role as a positive force in his life, was both important to the character and

something that is rarely explored on television.[31] This thinking on religion in relation to television representation aligned Goddard's thinking with the assumptions and logics that have generally guided writers and producers for the last fifteen years: that representation of religion *as religion* is rare and therefore unique. Goddard was in a position of power as the show's initial showrunner and had the personal experience with religion to supersede the implicit ideology of religion as risky. Goddard's acknowledged religiousness inoculated him to the fear of being considered religious. Goddard's religiousness, however well known in the writers' room and during the development process, wasn't publicly disclosed as part of the marketing and positioning of the show, nor was it an element discussed in press about the show. It operates within the production and affects that culture's ideology and work regarding religious representation, possibly paving the way for pushing through self-policing.

According to the Gages, the decisions that led to highlighting Matt's Catholicism in the show – not only as a character trait but also as a dominant influencer in how he views, acts in, and finds purpose in the world – were unexpected in their resonance.[32] Although the use of Catholicism in the show came from Drew Goddard's vision of the show, the presentation of religion was further developed due to the presence of Ruth Fletcher Gage and Christos Gage in the writers' room. Both Gages admit that they, while not religious, come from religious backgrounds that inform their writing. Ruth's family history involves historical persecution of her Protestant ancestors and eventual settling in western North Carolina, in a rural Southern context in which Christianity is a normalized part of the culture. Christos' family is Greek Orthodox, and both say that their background gave them a particular understanding of the place of religion in Matt's dramatic story arc. Additionally, Ruth pursued graduate studies in comparative religion and theology, so her particular personal history includes curiosity about and

desire for knowledge of religion. While having a religious background doesn't necessarily impact one's ability to write religious or spiritual storylines, it can act as a buttress against worries of offense and disrespect when writing about religion. This was certainly the case for the Gages on *Daredevil*.[33]

As they explained in an interview with me, the Gages were assigned episode nine of thirteen, "Speak of the Devil," which was the episode of the series in which Matt Murdock has a long, and deep discussion about ethics, morality, and personal responsibility with his Catholic priest, Father Lantom (Peter McRobbie). Up until their episode, Father Lantom's presence within the story had been light, and he had appeared minimally in only a few episodes.[34] Father Lantom's main contribution up to that point had been taking Matt's confession in a scene that was used to structure the show's promotional trailers. However, in "Speak of the Devil," the episode written by the Gages, the discussion between Lantom and Matt is the centerpiece of the episode and a "pivotal moral scene" for the series from their perspective.[35] The scene focuses on a discussion of what has become a well-worn superhero question: Is it ever worth the moral price the hero must pay to kill the villain? In this scene, Matt and Lantom move through the church, discussing the nature of the Devil and performing exegesis on some Bible passages that Father Lantom feels are pertinent. Within their religious discussion, the question of the Devil's existence and role in humanity is not just theological debate. For Father Lantom as well as for Matt, this discussion is grounded in the world they experience. Their conversation is not just about the Devil but also about evil and adversity and whether they exist in the form of a person causing such harm to humanity that killing them is necessary.

Father Lantom applies Biblical exegesis to Matt's moral conundrum, considering a quote from the Bible that the Gages chose specifically for its relatively unknown status as well as its openness to interpretation.[36] Father Lantom says to Matt:

> There is a wide gulf between inaction and murder, Matthew. Another man's evil does not make you good. Men have used the atrocities of their enemies to justify their own throughout history. So the question you have to ask yourself is are you struggling with the fact that you don't want to kill this man, but have to? Or that you don't have to kill him, but want to? "Like a muddied spring or a polluted fountain is the righteous man who gives way before the wicked." Proverbs 25-something, I never can remember. Meaning righteous men have a duty to stand up to evil. One interpretation. Another is that when the righteous succumb to sin, it is as harmful as if the public well were poisoned. Because the darkness of such an act... of taking a life... will spread to friends, neighbors... the entire community.[37]

The Gages deliberately chose the quote from Proverbs so that they could have the character perform exegesis on it in the scene and allow the characters to discuss the possible meanings in a serious way. Interestingly, even in the context of the supposedly vast array of textual possibilities granted to streaming television productions, the Gages were surprised that the scenes between Lantom and Matt survived at length throughout the editing process and through both Netflix's and Marvel's supervision of the series' production. They attributed the scene's survival to the first season's showrunner, Steven DeKnight, who came on board as showrunner midway through the show's thirteen-month development and writing period. DeKnight said he'd fight for them and their episode.[38] The fear of the scene being cut and the idea that the showrunner had to be prepared to intercede indicate the still-risky position of such

blatant engagement with religion. But the fact that the scene made its way into the final cut suggests a shift in what industry practitioners were willing and able to provide to their viewership in this stage of the post-network era.

The above scene is one of the best examples in this study of the sometimes stark differences between religious representation provided in a television text and the writers' discussion of that religious representation. The Gage's episode, and especially the scene described above, not only represents religion-qua-religion within a specifically Christian (not post-Christian) paradigm, but it also represents how a belief system functions within the character's life. It is explicitly Catholic and religious in a way rarely seen in post-network era prime-time dramas. And yet, the creatives working on the show, writing this representation, and presenting the narrative to the executive decision-makers, confessed that at the time they wrote it, they considered the scene a textual impossibility. In their discussion of the fear in writing it, the internalized norms of television production can be seen as on full display. Both Gages had not worked much within the television industry before becoming staff writers for *Daredevil*, yet nonetheless, they too were subject to the legacy practices and attendant ideologies of mainstream television that consider religion risky.

The scene ultimately served multiple purposes for the series. It allowed for an explicit discussion of the morality of the superhero within an interpretive frame that was well-known to many American viewers, making what could have been an unnatural discussion flow easily in terms of character and narrative. This pivotal scene also reasserts and reaffirms Matt's Catholicism as a defining characteristic, which, in turn, gives more weight to his decision to try to kill his adversary, Wilson Fisk (Vincent D'Onofrio), at episode's end. And, as many reviews of the series highlight, the scene distinguished the show's for its approach to religion.[39] The praise

of religion in the scene and episode, gained after the series was released to the public, emphasizes the view that a lot of writers have and that the Gages explicitly articulated: that expectations are low among viewers and critics for representing religion on television. If such representations make their way onto the screen – and these representations can somehow present religion as "part of a complex lived experience" – they have cleared a very low bar.[40] The writers were surprised by the overwhelmingly positive reviews of their episode and the series as a whole.[41] Ruth Fletcher Gage was particularly surprised by the breadth of religious outlets that praised the show, noting a Mormon reviewer's praise as particularly surprising.[42] Their surprise supports my claim throughout this study that the religious audience is not a consideration for the television industry, so much so that each time religious viewers enjoy a show not targeted at them, it surprises those creatives working on the shows (see also: the view expressed by Sundance TV/*Rectify*'s marketer in chapter two).

Matt's Catholicism, particularly as expressed through that scene, also struck a chord with critics who saw the approach to religion as unique for a television show. This presentation of religion, in turn, was seen as helping to elevate superhero genre as a whole. On the entertainment news website *Collider*, Evan Valentine's review of "Speak of the Devil" argued that the use of Catholic theology breathed new life into the superhero conflict. He wrote:

> To be honest, we've seen this song and dance before. We've had entire movies based around the idea in fact, with Batman questioning whether or not he should kill the Joker, and Superman questioning whether or not he should kill General Zod. Kind of ironic that we haven't seen this as much in Marvel movies or TV shows, but go figure. Here however, it's considered with a fresh take in that the answer to this question is linked primarily to Matt Murdock's religious background in Catholicism. This is an area (a

> superhero's religion) that *isn't* explored as much, and it's seeing Murdock struggle with the idea of killing Fisk due to his religious belief structure, rather than a code of morality he had set for himself from the offset, is something different. Also, rather than keeping the question inside and coming to a decision on his own, Matt's priest (Father Lantom), to whom he regularly visits for confession, practically drags Matt into his place of worship to dissect the question . . . If you had to make a recommendation as to which episode best sums up Daredevil's character and world, it would be this one.[43]

Valentine's review places *Daredevil* in conversation with recent superhero media to highlight its difference: that religion serves as a central place both within the narrative and for the character's development.

This assessment was not unique. For many reviewers—both popular press and trade—Matt Murdock's Catholicism was so distinctive to the show that it became a defining characteristic of both the superhero *and* the story. For *Slate*, Charles Moss wrote, "To really understand Daredevil—both the comic book and the new show—you have to understand his Catholicism."[44] And even before the series became available, the *Hollywood Reporter* titled its interview with the titular star, "*Daredevil's* Charlie Cox on Becoming a Religious Superhero," despite the fact that they only ask one question (out of nine) about that topic.[45] Because the approach to religion is singular for Daredevil and the show, it becomes more significant than a just serving as a mere character trait. Instead, it becomes defining for the show as a whole and the season's narrative arc.

Such reviews indicate that Goddard and the Gage's approach was taken as it was intended. They wanted to portray religion as "part of a complex lived experience" and a "positive force" in Matt Murdock's life, the foundation to which he turns to when in need of guidance. As

such, religion became in many ways a foundation for the narrative arc of Daredevil's origin story in the first season. Moreover, the praise for the religious representation in the series led to a shift in how Netflix positioned its representation of religion in its marketing for *Daredevil*'s second season. Having been accepted (or at least not visibly panned) by Netflix's target audiences—and thereby disproving long-standing assumptions about quality and fan audiences' negative reactions to religious representation —the first trailer for *Daredevil*'s second season recaps the first season through its representation as a series of fresco paintings on the walls and ceiling of a Catholic church. As this presentation via the trailer shows, once the show's religious representation was proven safe – and even desirable among both audience and industry – Netflix's marketing department subsequently literally re-inscribed the first season into a religious representational frame (see Figs. 7 and 8 above). Such a marketing strategy recalls the paratextual use of *The Last Supper* in marketing *Lost* and *Battlestar Galactica* (Figs. 1 and 2 in Introduction) in the mid-2000s and similarly indicates no particular religious influence on the plot, merely the use of arresting and familiar visuals to help market the show. The second season actually had far less religious representation than the first, possibly because writers such as the Gages and Drew Goddard were no longer involved. The vicissitudes of the industry and its season-by-season labor practices can sometimes lead to variations of representational approach and industrial discourse season-to-season as well.

AMAZON'S TWO AUDIENCES

Despite the many similarities between Amazon and older models of television production, the former distinguishes itself through its conception of its audience. According to an executive in charge of dramas at Amazon Studios, Carolyn Newman, Amazon considers its Prime members, who comprise the viewer pool for its productions, to be "intelligent viewers,

binge watchers interested in conversation."[46] In an interview with me, she further explained that Amazon productions are meant to appeal to either the Comic-Con audience or the NPR (National Public Radio) audience.[47] Of courses, these are not necessarily mutually exclusive categories in practice (*Hand of God* was positioned for crossover appeal based largely on its star, Ron Perlman's history in genre fare), but Amazon Studios envisions them as two clear niches that they wish to target with different types of programs. *Transparent* (2014-) targets the NPR audience, and *The Man in the High Castle* (2015-), a Phillip K. Dick adaptation, was positioned as more for the Comic-Con audience. These two target audiences align with more commonly used descriptions of the engaged fan audience and the affluent quality audience. As Amazon's use of Comic-Con and NPR to describe their target audience indicates, they are targeting a niche within a niche.

The Comic-Con audience, based on my extrapolation from Amazon executive Newman's discussion of it, is affluent enough to attend a convention, engaged enough to wait hours in line for a panel or screening, often promiscuous in their adoration within a genre, and knowledgeable enough to use social media to perform publicity for the media object as a mode of reciprocity. The Comic-Con audience is an audience comprised of fans, but fans who are overtly affluent consumers. That is the key implication of describing these viewers in terms of Comic-Con: Popular culture conventions, particularly San Diego Comic-Con, require (often hefty) payment to get into the gates. During the last decade, they have rapidly become a key site of publicity for major media properties by major media conglomerates. Fans must buy their way in and are then expected to both figuratively and literally buy media products. As Matt Hills argues, "Fandom has been curiously emptied of the dimensions which, I would suggest, most clearly define it: dimensions of affect, attachment, and even passion, as well as, crucially, the dimensions of

commodification through which these processes are enabled and constrained."[48] Describing Amazon Prime's viewers as Comic-Con viewers similarly empties, or at least minimizes, the affective elements of fandom in favor of the fan activity that can be commodified or methodically tracked and surveilled. Many of the same assumptions made about (the affluent fan's) audience content with shows like *Supernatural* and *Preacher* (as discussed in chapters four and five) are made about Amazon Prime's "Comic-Con audience" as well.

Meanwhile, Amazon's so-called NPR audience – again extrapolated from Newman's use of the term – is based on older industrial imaginings of the quality audience (as discussed in the introduction and chapter two). The NPR audience invokes ideas of liberal, affluent, coastal elites, or, in the words that National Public Media uses to describe its radio branch's audience: "cultural, connected, intellectual and influential . . . affluent and curious."[49] Judging by the series that Amazon Studios creates that are meant to appeal to an upscale, liberal, niche audience (e.g., *Transparent, Mozart in the Jungle* [2014-], *Mad Dogs* [2015-]) the company is using progressive ideology to prominently appeal to a certain contingent of viewers in addition to their less visible children's programming. Amazon's first breakout success, at least in terms entering into the cultural discussion of quality television, was *Transparent* (2014-), a family drama centering around a father transitioning genders later in his life. With this show, Amazon leveraged its progressive content to gain the attention of a small niche of elite viewers (or at least viewers who perceived themselves as such). Like Netflix, Amazon does not release its audience data. Nonetheless, a cursory survey of the responses of television critics, journalists, public intellectuals, and activists on social media displays much discussion, lauding, and even evangelizing about the show.[50] The NPR audience is imagined to be connected by social media; more specifically, they are connected to like-minded people. In 2011, a study by Duke scholars

used the connected social networks of journalists to determine political ideologies of a variety of news journalists and websites. The researchers concluded that, based on the public social networks of those working there, NPR did indeed have a slight liberal bias, confirming what conservatives have decried about the partially publicly funded NPR for decades. Such a discovery reinforces the idea of NPR as a site around which affluent liberals can be identified.[51]

This connection made between the NPR audience and the quality audience updates how affluent liberals have been seen by scholars and industry practitioners as engaging with certain types of TV since the early 1970s. In her study of MTM sitcoms in the 1970s and the construction of their quality designation, Jane Feuer concludes, "Quality TV is liberal TV."[52] This simple linkage has continued for decades, even though the specific genres, styles, and narrative forms associated with quality TV have evolved during that time. There have been changes and alterations as American culture and the television industry has changed, but there remains an articulation between affluence and progressivism in the quality audience configuration. While this linkage made with Amazon's construction of an NPR audience, this niche, unlike the quality audience, is not imagined for the purposes of selling audiences to more high-end or elite advertisers. The business model is different, and so the viewers and the shows they consume are valued differently as well. Amazon uses NPR as shorthand for affluence and liberalism, yes, but also for connectedness and influence. The retailer-streaming service is looking to appeal to those elites who will go on Twitter and Facebook and do the publicity work for the show through either their praise or their conversations about the show's controversial subject matter. They seek brand missionaries to help sell—and help buy—what Amazon is selling.[53]

Each streaming service establishes its brand through PR, advertising, and content licensing deals. The particular licensed (i.e., evergreen) shows vaunted as exclusive to the particular streaming service help Amazon to refine its target audience(s) and brand identity. Original programming from Amazon Studios, in turn, provides another means by which Amazon can refine its brand and differentiate itself in the marketplace, much as was the case when cable networks such as HBO, FX, and TNT moved into producing originals in the 1990s and early 2000s. Such practices of distinction and differentiation are especially important to pursue for Amazon Prime, which functions as a small division within a larger mega-company broadly perceived to be the world's largest retailer.

As noted above, Amazon, in particular, has used their exclusive deals to differentiate their service from the well-established Netflix. For Amazon, this included an exclusive, long-term licensing deal of HBO's older content like *The Sopranos* (1999-2007)*, The Wire* (2002-2008)*,* and *The Comeback* (2005, 2014-) in May of 2014.[54] This deal with HBO was finalized less than a month after Amazon greenlit *Transparent* for a ten-episode series.[55] The "pilot season" during which *Transparent* was ordered to series also included series that were marked by many quality television characteristics: anti-hero protagonists (*Bosch* [2014-]), established television auteurs such as Chris Carter at the helm (*The After* [2014]), and a comedy about the backstage dynamics of a symphony (*Mozart in the Jungle* [2014-]). This wave of original series represented a stark departure from Amazon's earlier original content, *Alpha House* and *Betas*, which were broader comedies. While Netflix often has been accused of trying to mimic HBO's brand, Amazon literally established itself as a quality service by exclusively licensing programming that established HBO's quality television brand in the first place. Amazon's HBO Collection is

promoted similarly to Amazon Prime's original series within both the website and app. Amazon Prime uses both syndicated and original series to mutually build its identity.

One thing that Amazon Studios sees its "two audiences" as sharing is an interest in media forms that evoke conversation. Amazon executive Carolyn Newman said as much and went on to apply that perspective to the *Hand of God* pilot: "The pilot did exactly what we intended: there were people who loved it and others who hated it . . . We expected some people feeling attacked."[56] The idea of provoking conversation by presenting a subject or topic that is under-represented in the current television spectrum aligns with long-standing television industrial practices of cultivating an edgy brand for a show or outlet. One need only look to Amazon Prime's tent-pole quality series, *Transparent*, and the industrial and critical discourses about its representations of transgender identities. At the center of *Transparent*'s marketing, critical praise, claims to uniqueness in content and style, awards, and most importantly for this study, discourses about its production culture, is its fresh, distinctive representation of transgendered identity.[57] The conversation about *Transparent* as something new to television is largely driven by its representation of transgender individuals, an edgy subject that makes noise in the post-network era landscape. *Hand of God* similarly was positioned by Amazon Studios as edgy in order to create conversation. However, even though in this project *Hand of God* represents the example of a show that comes closest to using religious representation to explicitly cultivate edginess, its creatives were far less direct in how they spoke about religion with the press, and the marketing of the show was far less explicit about its treatment of religion than *Transparent* was in its treatment of transgender representation.

Hand of God and *Transparent* both illustrate Amazon's desire to spur conversation, even controversy, by representing themes and stories perceived to be polarizing. Shows tailored for

the so-called NPR audience of Amazon Prime were not the only ones treated in such a fashion. For example, in early 2015, Amazon greenlit *The Man in the High Castle* (2015-) to series. Based on a Philip K. Dick story, *High Castle* presents an alternate history in which the Axis powers won World War II and succeed in world domination.[58] While the threat of Nazi take-over (situated in a safely historical context) is less controversial than transgender issues or exploring religious corruption, the Neo-Nazi trappings of the show are not necessarily safe made even less so by its marketing (see Fig. 9).[59] This is the kind of show likely to cause the type of conversation desired among its Amazon's Comic-Con audience. It illustrates Amazon Prime's general strategy with its original programming: courting controversial conversations – both within particular niches and beyond them – in order to cultivate edge.

Figure 9: *The Man in the High Castle* controversial marketing on a New York City subway car.[60]

AMAZON ON EDGE: *HAND OF GOD*

Building on its use of *Transparent* and other dramas such as *Mad Dogs* and *Mozart in the Jungle* to cast itself as the place to go for television that could not appear anywhere else, Amazon Studios picked up *Hand of God* following its appearance in Amazon's August 2014 pilot season (the season following *Transparent*'s pick-up). The latter series began in September of 2015 and includes a number of examples of "edgy" content: the main plot of the pilot features a corrupt judge, Pernell Harris (Ron Perlman), who becomes a born-again Christian following the brutal

beating of his son and the rape of his daughter-in-law (Alona Tal) by an assailant. The reason for this attack and the responsible parties behind it are revealed to Pernell through divine visions over the course of the first season. The show explores religion as a major factor of American culture, one not exempt from the corruption that many quality television dramas have explored in governance, law enforcement, business, families, etc. Ben Watkins, the creator or *Hand of God*, described the show as one "where the main character thinks that God is talking to him and another main character is a preacher, but the show itself is not actually about religion."[61] As this statement indicates, even *Hand of God*, which takes a deliberately edgy to religious representation, is not immune from being presented by its one of its key creative figures as "not actually about religion." In other words, here again we see the general sense of risk in Hollywood and the television industry about religious television in effect. But Watkins' denial was an exception to a largely more engaged public discourse about religion as a subject of television drama.

Before *Hand of God* even premiered in Amazon's Fall 2014 pilot season, *IndieWire* journalist Jai Tiggett asked showrunner Watkins about creating a show with such an overt religious narrative. *Hand of God* was the first series created and overseen by Watkins, who had previously written and acted on *Burn Notice* (USA, 2007-2013). Tiggett asked, "Spirituality and religion can be controversial topics, especially for TV. Did you have any pushback or hesitation about tackling it in the show?"[62] The framing of this question suggests a perception that the show would receive negative reactions. However, Watkins answered with surprising candor:

> When we went out to pitch it, people would be frightened to death about the idea of a show with the word "God" in the title, and I actually got approached about changing the title and I said no. Even as a writer I hesitated a little bit to go down that road, knowing

> that it would scare a lot of people. But when I decided to write it I felt like, "I have to write this, and even if I don't ever make it I'll never regret writing it." And then I just pushed forward. Every time my rational self would say, "You should pull back a little bit on that," I just had to remember what the purpose was and try to do what scared me.[63]

The use of words liked “frightened” and “scared” indicate the high stakes of trying to sell this kind of project, even as streaming platforms were beginning to take the lead in exceeding the usual standards of acceptable content. Such a response in light of Watkins’ denial discussed above indicates the ambivalence of creatives working within both the persistent cultural hesitation regarding religion while also in a platform that foregrounds distinction, with an ultimate willingness to engage in a public discourse about religious representation on television dramas.

Notably, Watkins’ framing of his treatment of religion – including a description of the hesitation and danger of pitching and writing the show, followed by his acceptance of the fear and his willingness to keep going – calls attention to his courage as a writer. He presents a heroic authorial persona of himself, an image of someone that pursues art despite what the arbiters of the market or the managers of culture might say. Such a persona is further supported in Watkins’ minimal social media presence. On Twitter, he mostly retweets the social media of his cast and crew or fans who are talking positively about *Hand of God*. Occasionally, his retweets are political, especially in cases of nationwide attention to racial injustices. However, he rarely presents his own voice on Twitter.[64] The image this creates is of an iconoclast who doesn’t care about offending people in his pursuit of what he perceives as truth or art. As the shooting of the first season of *Hand of God* ended in late May 2015, Watkins retweeted an Instagram photo from Ron Perlman *(Beauty and the Beast* [CBS, 1987-1990], *Hellboy* [Del Toro, 2004]), star of the

show, in which Watkins is wearing a shirt that, somewhat obscured by fabric folds, reads: "I met God, She's black."[65] This t-shirt choice and its subsequent sharing on social media via Ron Perlman (who has the largest number of followers among the cast) supports both Watkins' persona and his show's narrative premise. Like the t-shirt, the show risks offense in order to elicit conversation. The risk and resulting conversation is precisely the point; they grant the show its "edgy" *bona fides*.

***Hand of God*'s Representation of Religion**

The content of the show continually reinforces the show as edgy and uniquely folds religion into this industrial positioning. In the pilot, Judge Pernell Harris conscripts a violent disciple to kill in the name of God, even as he explores his spiritual rebirth in a church led by a dubious former child-star. *Hand of God* presents religion's corruption in both believers and hypocrites, indicting both as part of its all-over bleak view of corrupt humanity. The characters curse freely; the violence is graphic, and drug use is commonplace. Yet it is not the behavior of the religious characters, but rather corruption in the institution of religion that sets this show apart. *Hand of God*, despite Watkins' inconsistent disavowal of it as a religious show, explores religion in relation to the normalized idea of American religion and the dominant location of religious corruption: white, patriarchal, Protestant Christianity. Importantly, in *Hand of God*, the dimensions of this vision of religion are explored as specifics, not as norms within a post-Christian sensibility, as has been the case with other series in this project including *Supernatural* and *Dominion*.

The series begins with Pernell speaking in tongues, naked in a local fountain, implying that he has gone through a ritual baptism in order to be born again during a three-day absence from his work and family. The image mirrors the scenes of baptism discussed in chapter two

about *Friday Night Lights* and *Rectify*, and it establishes Pernell as probably insane but also invested in his role as a religious figure – and a public one at that. Soon thereafter, the show reveals one of Pernell's visions/hallucinations. He visits his comatose and brain-dead son in the hospital and hears his son's voice speak to him, requiring a covenant of revenge. The son asks Pernell to remember his promise to avenge his death and directs Pernell to take an active role, saying, "You find him. . . You made a promise to me. Keep it." It is an order from something beyond him. Pernell's later encounters with the visions granted him through his son's tragedy continue to build on his idea that he is on a mission from God. Religion is addressed as a specific structuring institution of culture and power. Perhaps this specificity of belief is because Watkins was inspired by a very narrow vision of religious hypocrisy: he has said he was inspired by "these really popular preachers [such as Ted Haggard] with huge mega-churches, and then they'll have a fall from grace." Alternately, perhaps Watkins' presentation of religion stems from his position as a person of color for whom whiteness is not invisible.[66] *Hand of God* is notable for not only its edgy approach to its subject matter but also its conscious exploration of how race and gender shape notions of American Christianity.

Regarding race, *Hand of God* does not overtly comment on the fact that all three characters at the core of the religious story—Pernell, his felonious "disciple" KD (Garret Dillahunt), and Reverend Paul Curtis (Julian Morris), the head of the church that the judge joins by the end of the pilot—are white men. The religious world that *Hand of God* represents is one led by white men, although later in the thirteen-episode season, the Reverend works with an African-American preacher toward the goal of televising his church's proceedings. In contrast to this largely white world, Pernell's friend, Mayor Robert "Bobo" Boston (Andre Royo), who is African-American, and Pernell's wife, Crystal (Dana Delaney), as well as Pernell's regular

prostitute, Tessie (Emayatzy Corinealdi), who is a black woman, all react with explicit skepticism to his claim of being "born again" and called to a higher purpose by God. On display here is not the Southern Christian parity between races as portrayed on *Friday Night Lights*. The women and the people of color who round out the ensemble of *Hand of God* are almost entirely outside of and dubious of the claims of religion. The only exception is Rev. Cutis' own disciple, Alicia (Elizabeth McLaughlin), who uses her beauty and wiles to gain money and power for Rev. Curtis' Hand of God church. She is a believer and an integral part of the eponymous church and religious story. However, that "integral part" is one of ostensible submission—to Rev. Curtis, to Pernell and to other powerful men to support her cause. Thus, Alicia serves to further highlight the white masculine dominance of religion in America, or at least the religion that is typically represented through television across the mainstream landscape. Alicia is the arrow that points to the all-white, all-male power structure that is normalized in American Christianity and critiqued in the show.

Additionally, Pernell uses his daughter-in-law, Jocelyn, to try and establish his religious power in the pilot. Pernell's visions begin with the voice of his comatose and brain-dead son, who was beaten nearly to death after being forced to watch his wife be raped. Pernell's visions begin as whispers only he can hear from his son, telling him that he has to find the perpetrator of the crime. This leads to Pernell believing that God is operating through his son to call Pernell to a higher purpose, and as a result, he fights to keep his son on life-support after his wife and daughter had decided to remove the life support. Beyond merely usurping the female family members' decision regarding life support, Pernell further asserts his power—via his visions—over Jocelyn when he forces her to examine the man he believes to be her rapist in the only way she could recognize the man and in the way that forces her to relive her trauma: by looking at his

genitals. It is humiliating and traumatic for her, and it seemingly disputes Pernell's claims of divine vision. She says the suspect is not the man who raped her. However, at the end of the episode, KD beats the suspect until he admits that he is the man who raped Jocelyn, saying that "they" made him. On this enigmatic note, which quashes Jocelyn's power and idea of truth in favor of the men's visions and actions, Pernell's visions are affirmed as is his role as a prophet. By the end of the season, Pernell's visions have been further proven as they revealed the truth of the conspiracy that led to his son's beating.

For the men in *Hand of God*, religion is tied to fame, class, and power. Reverend Curtis is introduced as a former child-star on *The Young and the Restless* and possibly a con-man. Regardless of the truth of his faith, which is presented as dubious, he is interested in the money, fame, and resulting power that being a charismatic, popular religious leader can bring. This personality trait is further explored as his goal to become a televangelist is revealed and almost successfully reached throughout the season. Subsequently we see Curtis' ultimate broken disappointment when his televangelist hopes are not realized. The final images of Curtis for the season are of him sadly playing the piano, singing the hymn that was the foundation for his dream of his first televised preaching.

All of these aspects of *Hand of God*'s representations of religion are nuanced, complex, and explored as existing within the structuring power systems of American culture. *Hand of God* is looped into the same sense of textual possibilities with which post-network quality dramas approach other controversial subjects such as drug use, sexuality, and graphic violence Like *Daredevil*, the content of *Hand of God* illustrates the evolving openness of streaming sites' original programming in tension with the vestiges of the legacy of the risk of directly presenting and critiquing religion via industrial discourse. Where *Hand of God* most distinguishes itself

from Netflix's *Daredevil* is in its market positioning; from the beginning, Amazon's *Hand of God* uses religion—not as mythology or spirituality but as traditional religion—as a strategy of cultivating edge and market differentiation. I discuss it as such in the next section. Despite this overt textual strategy, Watkins' ambivalence but ultimate openness in discussing religious representation indicates the power of the legacy ideology of avoiding religious discourses as well as the potential challenge and change to this ideology's dominance.

Courting Controversy and Conversation

Among the programs in this study, *Hand of God* employs the most controversial representation of religion by using it to explore corruption across social institutions, including religion. According to Amazon executive Carolyn Newman, Amazon Studios' metric for success is "about getting conversations going," which is, of course, a rhetorical strategy for a company that, like Netflix, does not disclose viewer numbers.[67] But this claim also sheds light on Amazon Prime's audience targeting and branding within the discourses of the television industry. Instead of numerical data, Amazon executives construct ideas of success around "conversation," particularly conversation that can be seen and quantified through online spaces like Amazon's customer reviews, IMDB ratings (a site also owned by Amazon), and social media posts. These metrics are similar to audience engagement measurements that are increasingly employed by legacy outlets.[68] For example, Nielsen began measuring Twitter TV ratings in 2014, and engagement ratings since have gained enough prominence in the industry to begin being published regularly in *Variety* at that time as well.[69] But unlike engagement, which is often discussed as fairly innocuous, Amazon's search for "conversations" implies conflict and explicitly risks alienation on the part of some viewers. Newman said of the *Hand of God* pilot:

> People really responded to the show [because it] tackled the subject matter [of religion], and a lot of people expressed that it was something that they hadn't seen before. And some people hated it who felt like it was religion-bashing. And we accepted that too because obviously it's not. Some people felt that it was attacking their beliefs, and we knew that that was going to be part of the conversation. And that's exactly what we expected. That's what we thought the show would be: a touchstone [to that conversation about belief that] we're still in the early processes [of seeing shows] talk about.[70]

Part of Newman's job as an executive at Amazon Studios is to craft a narrative about their studio and their programming that differentiates it from older forms of television, despite drawing on those older forms. Newman implies that Amazon has sloughed off the fear of audience alienation that has presumably kept truly risky art away from reaching viewers. Part of the cultural and industrial narrative perpetuated by those involved with shows on new streaming platforms is that their shows are avant-garde of a new wave of content. While this is mostly a marketing strategy, these platforms and their programming do possibly represent a shift in terms of representing religion and how creatives discuss that representation.

Hand of God's marketing reflected its cultivation of edge through subtle (and, at times, not-so-subtle) references to the show's representation of religion. In addition to the cultivation of Ben Watkins as fearless auteur illustrated most clearly in the *IndieWire* interview analyzed above, *Hand of God*'s first season marketing push used religious tropes in a way rarely seen in a show's first-season marketing. The posters and billboards for the series featured variations on one image and tagline: Ron Perlman's horizontal face occupying the bottom third of the poster, looking up, past gray space and the tagline "In Sanity We Trust," and toward the top-third occupied by origami doves (Fig. 10). The tagline invites viewers to think about God, since that is

the word in the familiar phrase that has been replaced by “Sanity.” Concurrently, visible is a man’s face seemingly looking to the Heavens for answers. As revealed in the pilot, the white paper doves decorated the Church space in *Hand of God*; a white dove also serves as a longstanding icon for the Holy Spirit third of the Christian trinity. While these elements imply religion, they are not overt. *Hand of God* cultivates religion-as-edge moreso than any other case study in this dissertation, but it is still far from the strategies of edge by which other controversial subjects are framed, such as transgender identity in its sister program *Transparent*.

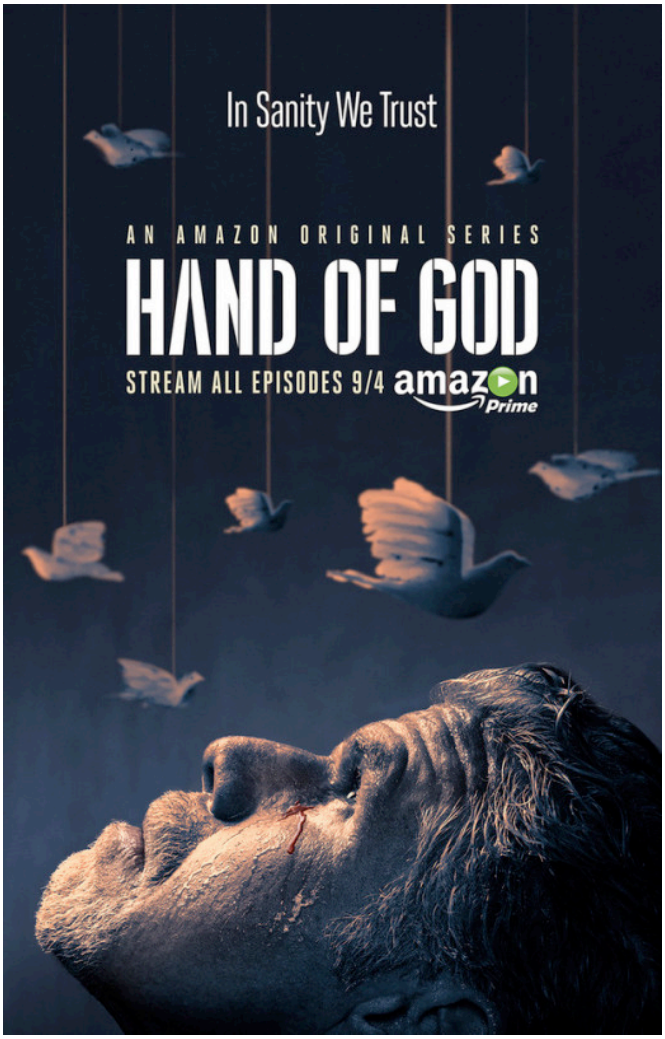

Figure 10: *Hand of God* season 1 promo art

Conclusion

This chapter began with a detailed overview of the streaming platforms Netflix and Amazon Prime, their marketing and key target audiences, and the discourses of innovation and quality they have circulated in order to build their respective brands. Based on industry discourses about new media and streaming video on demand sites, one might expect Amazon and Netflix to be places for innovation in representing religion on shows and as well as in creative and industrial discourses. Indeed, this chapter presents examples that reflect that innovation: *Daredevil* and *Hand of God*. Yet, to an extent, their representations of religion still belie the persistent sense among their writers that religion is risky. The production of the first season of Marvel's *Daredevil* for Netflix exemplifies this perspective. In marketing and interviews with creatives, it is evident that *Daredevil* faced more scrutiny, hesitancy, and containment of religion than did Amazon's *Hand of God*. The different cultural discourses circulating around these shows is a product of their distinct industrial positioning: Certainly Netflix—and Marvel—didn't need to create noise via marketing and industrial positioning through their use of religion in their series; as part of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, the show was already well-known, highly likely to be successful, and a useful brand extension. As such, they did not need to cultivate edge through *Daredevil*'s religious representation, nor did Netflix or Marvel feel the need to contain religious representations. However, the writers and producers for *Daredevil* still began their work on the show believing that such containment was a necessity, despite the supposed openness of Netflix's brand. Only as they became comfortable in the writers' room and in their relationship with Netflix and Marvel did they more directly engage with religion in their stories – and public discourse. The creatives' continued belief that religion would *of course* be contained illustrates how the legacy practices of Hollywood television production have been so internalized and normalized that creatives assume, regardless of outlet, the television industry resists religion

across the board. Only now, perhaps, can we see some more substantive cracks in this ideological armor, spearheaded by streaming platforms but, as the case of *Preacher* indicates, not necessarily limited to them.

Meanwhile, Amazon's struggle to take on Netflix directly has pushed it to license and support the one show in this study that unhesitatingly is testing the boundaries of religious representation and risking blasphemy, backlash, and audience alienation in doing so. *Hand of God* has gained some protection in doing so by positioning creator Ben Watkins in the quality auteurist mode, folding the approach to religion into his "brave" artistic vision and linking the show to edginess via marketing materials. *Hand of God*, then, is perhaps the first show of a new era in which religion is finally treated like any other controversial subject: ready to be exploited – and discussed head on by creatives and executives – within the television industry.

---

[1] Derek Kompare, "Publishing Flow DVD Box Sets and the Reconception of Television," *Television & New Media* 7, no. 4 (November 1, 2006): 335–60, doi:10.1177/1527476404270609.
[2] Chuck Tryon, "TV Got Better: Netflix's Original Programming Strategies and the On-Demand Television Transition," *Media Industries* 2, no. 2 (December 27, 2015), http://www.mediaindustriesjournal.org/index.php/mij/article/view/126; T.C. Sottek, "Netflix Challenges the TV Establishment with Emmy Wins for 'House of Cards,'" *The Verge*, September 22, 2013, http://www.theverge.com/2013/9/22/4759754/netflix-challenges-the-tv-establishment-with-emmy-wins-for-house-of; James Poniewozik, "Streaming TV Isn't Just a New Way to Watch. It's a New Genre.," *The New York Times*, December 16, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/20/arts/television/streaming-tv-isnt-just-a-new-way-to-watch-its-a-new-genre.html.
[3] Jaramillo, Deborah L. "The Family Racket: AOL Time Warner, HBO, *The Sopranos*, and the Construction of a Quality Brand." *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 26, no. 1 (January 1, 2002): 59–75; Tryon, "TV Got Better."
[4] Charles Moss, "Daredevil's Greatest Superpower Is His Catholicism," *Slate*, April 10, 2015, http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2015/04/netflix_s_daredevil_show_understands_that_catholicism_is_the_superhero_s.html; Bilal Mian, "'Daredevil's' Charlie Cox on Becoming a Religious Superhero," *The Hollywood Reporter*, April 10, 2015, http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/live-feed/daredevils-charlie-cox-becoming-a-787809; Jai Tiggett, "Interview: 'Hand of God' Creator Ben Watkins Talks Hollywood's Fear of Religion, Creating 360° Portrayals of Black Women, More," *Shadow and Act, IndieWire*, August 27, 2014, http://blogs.indiewire.com/shadowandact/interview-hand-of-god-creator-ben-watkins-talks-

hollywoods-fear-of-religion-creating-360-portrayals-of-black-women-more-20140827; Meghan O'Keefe, "Amazon Fall Pilot Season: 'Hand Of God' Is Disturbing And Ridiculous," *Decider*, August 28, 2014, http://decider.com/2014/08/28/amazon-hand-of-god/.

[5] Moss, "Daredevil's Greatest Strenth;" Mian, "Daredevil's Charlie Cox."

[6] Gavia Baker-Whitelaw, "Decoding the Artistic Inspiration behind 'Daredevil's Gorgeous Season 2 Posters," *The Daily Dot*, March 15, 2016, http://www.dailydot.com/geek/daredevil-season-2-caravaggio-posters/.

[7] From Baker-Whitelaw, "Decoding."

[8] Michael Curtin, "On Edge: Culture Industries in the Neo Network Era," in *The Media Studies Reader*, ed. Laurie Ouellette, First edition (New York: Routledge, 2013).

[9] See: Chuck Tryon, "TV Got Better: Netflix's Original Programming Strategies and the On-Demand Television Transition," *Media Industries* 2, no. 2 (December 27, 2015), http://www.mediaindustriesjournal.org/index.php/mij/article/view/126.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid.

[12] "Netflix Is Now Available Around the World," *Netflix Media Center*, January 6, 2016, https://media.netflix.com/en/press-releases/netflix-is-now-available-around-the-world.

[13] Christina Warren, "HANDS ON: Amazon's Prime Instant Video," *Mashable*, February 22, 2011, http://mashable.com/2011/02/22/amazon-prime-instant-video/.

[14] Amazon is also in the business of data in order to target potential customers. For more, see: Timothy Havens, "Media Programming in an Era of Big Data," *Media Industries* 1, no. 2 (September 15, 2014), http://www.mediaindustriesjournal.org/index.php/mij/article/view/43.

[15] Jeff Baumgartner, "Netflix Has Lowest Churn Rate Among OTT Services: Study," *Multichannel News*, April 14, 2016, http://www.multichannel.com/news/content/netflix-has-lowest-churn-rate-among-ott-services-study/404142.

[16] Brad Stone, "Testing Over, Hulu.com to Open Its TV and Film Offerings This Week," *The New York Times*, March 11, 2008, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/11/business/media/11hulu.html.

[17] David Lieberman, "Hulu Introduces $11.99 Commercial-Free Option, But Vows To Boost Ad Sales," *Deadline*, September 2, 2015, http://deadline.com/2015/09/hulu-ad-free-service-1201512438/.

[18] Mike Hale, "Steven Van Zandt in Norwegian Netflix Series 'Lilyhammer,'" *The New York Times*, February 5, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/06/arts/television/steven-van-zandt-in-norwegian-netflix-series-lilyhammer.html.

[19] John P. Mello Jr, "Hulu Enters Original Content Biz with 'Battleground' Series," *Tech Hive*, February 16, 2012, http://www.techhive.com/article/250089/hulu_gets_into_original_content_biz_with_series_called_battleground.html.

[20] Tierney Bricker, "Whoa, *Mozart in the Jungle* Pulls off Golden Globes Upset," *E! Online*, January 10, 2016, http://www.eonline.com/news/729708/mozart-in-the-jungle-pulls-off-huge-golden-globes-upset-winning-best-comedy-series.

[21] Sarah Perez, "Amazon Studios Now Funding Original Content Series For Amazon Instant Video Service," *TechCrunch*, May 2, 2012, http://techcrunch.com/2012/05/02/amazon-studios-now-funding-original-content-series-for-amazon-instant-video-service/.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Michael Malone, "TCA: 'Visionary Creators' Wanted, Says Amazon's Price," *Broadcasting & Cable*, (January 11, 2016), http://www.broadcastingcable.com/news/programming/tca-visionary-creators-wanted-says-amazon-s-price/146863.
[24] "Emmy Winners and Nominees 2013: The Complete List," *The Hollywood Reporter*, September 22, 2013, http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/emmy-winners-nominees-2013-complete-633769.
[25] Jon Weisman, "Emmy Nominations Announced: 'House of Cards' Makes History," *Variety*, July 18, 2013, http://variety.com/2013/tv/awards/emmy-nominees-2013-emmys-awards-nominations-full-list-1200564301/.
[26] T.C. Sottek, "Netflix Challenges the TV Establishment."
[27] Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures*, (New York: Routledge, 2002), 27.
[28] Gage interview.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Ibid.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Ibid..
[37] "Speak of the Devil," *Daredevil*.
[38] Gage interview.
[39] Kate O'Hare, "How Catholic IS 'Marvel's Daredevil' on Netflix?," *Patheos*, April 10, 2015, http://www.patheos.com/blogs/kateohare/2015/04/how-catholic-is-marvels-daredevil-on-netflix/; Brad Miner, "Daredevil and the Devil," *The Catholic Thing*, May 18, 2015, https://www.thecatholicthing.org/2015/05/18/daredevil-and-the-devil/; Moss, "Daredevil's Greatest Superpower;" Mian, "*Daredevil's* Charlie Cox."
[40] Gage interview.
[41] O'Hare; Miner; Moss; Mian.
[42] Gage interview; O'Hare; Miner.
[43] Evan Valentine, "*Daredevil* Season 1 Episode 9 'Speak of the Devil' Recap," *Collider*, May 7, 2015, http://collider.com/daredevil-season-1-episode-9-speak-of-the-devil-recap/.
[44] Charles Moss, "Daredevil's Greatest Superpower Is His Catholicism," *Slate*, April 10, 2015, http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2015/04/netflix_s_daredevil_show_understands_that_catholicism_is_the_superhero_s.html.
[45] Bilal Mian, "'Daredevil's' Charlie Cox on Becoming a Religious Superhero," *The Hollywood Reporter*, April 10, 2015, http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/live-feed/daredevils-charlie-cox-becoming-a-787809.
[46] Carolyn Newman, telephone interview, January 13, 2015.
[47] Ibid.
[48] Hills, *Fan Cultures*, 65.
[49] "Public Radio Audience Demographics - NPR Profiles," *National Public Media*, accessed May 18, 2015, http://nationalpublicmedia.com/npr/audience/.
[50]James Poniewozik, "Streaming TV Isn't Just a New Way to Watch. It's a New Genre.," *The New York Times*, December 16, 2015,

http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/20/arts/television/streaming-tv-isnt-just-a-new-way-to-watch-its-a-new-genre.html; Alan Sepinwall, "Review: Amazon's 'Transparent' Clearly the Best New Show of the Fall," *HitFix*, September 24, 2014, http://www.hitfix.com/whats-alan-watching/review-amazons-transparent-clearly-the-best-new-show-of-the-fall; Emily Nussbaum, "Open Secret," *The New Yorker*, September 29, 2014, http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/09/29/open-secret; Lori Rackl, "Chicago Native Jill Soloway Creates Season's Best New Show, 'Transparent,'" *Chicago Sun-Times*, September 25, 2014, http://chicago.suntimes.com/entertainment/chicago-native-jill-soloway-creates-seasons-best-new-show-transparent/; Willa Paskin, "See Me: *Transparent* Is the Fall's Only Great New Show.," *Slate*, September 29, 2014, http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/television/2014/09/transparent_on_amazon_prime_reviewed_it_s_the_fall_s_best_new_show.html.

[51] Jeff Bercovici, "Science Settles It: NPR's Liberal, But Not Very," *Forbes*, March 22, 2011, http://www.forbes.com/sites/jeffbercovici/2011/03/22/science-settles-it-nprs-liberal-but-not-very/.

[52] Jane Feuer, "The MTM Style," *MTM 'Quality Television,'* ed. Jane Feuer, Paul Kerr, and Tise Vahimagi, (London: BFI, 1984), 56.

[53] Henry Jenkins, Joshua Benjamin Green, and Sam Ford, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture* (New York: NYU Press, 2012).

[54] Marisa Guthrie, "HBO Inks Exclusive Deal With Amazon Prime," *The Hollywood Reporter*, April 23, 2014, http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/hbo-inks-deal-amazon-prime-698379.

[55] Natalie Jarvey, "Amazon Studios' Roy Price Reveals Series Orders (Q&A)," *The Hollywood Reporter*, March 31, 2014, http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/amazon-studios-roy-price-reveals-687846.

[56] Newman interview.

[57] Cael Keegan, "Op-Ed: How Transparent Tried and Failed to Represent Trans Men | Advocate.com," *Advocate*, October 22, 2014, http://www.advocate.com/commentary/2014/10/22/op-ed-how-transparent-tried-and-failed-represent-trans-men; Margy Rochlin, "In 'Transparent,' a Heroine Evolves Further Still," *The New York Times*, November 27, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/29/arts/television/in-transparent-a-heroine-evolves-further-still.html; Ryan Gajewski, "Emmys: 'Transparent's' Jeffrey Tambor, Jill Soloway Speak Out About Transgender Issues," *The Hollywood Reporter*, September 20, 2015, http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/emmys-transparents-jeffrey-tambor-jill-825280; Malina Saval, "Jeffrey Tambor on 'Transparent': 'People's Lives Depend on This'," *Variety*, March 18, 2016, http://variety.com/2016/scene/vpage/transparent-jeffrey-tambor-j-j-abrams-man-on-the-land-1201733683/.

[58] Hilary Lewis, "Amazon Orders 5 New Series Including 'Man in the High Castle,'" *The Hollywood Reporter*, February 18, 2015, http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/amazon-orders-5-new-series-774725.

[59] Laura Wagner, "New York Subway Pulls Nazi-Themed Ads For New Show, 'Man In The High Castle,'" *NPR.org*, November 25, 2015, http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2015/11/25/457410075/new-york-subway-pulls-nazi-themed-ads-for-new-show-the-man-in-the-high-castle.

[60] Ibid.

[61] Tiggett.

[62] Ibid.
[63] Ibid.
[64] Ben Watkins, "How I Wish This Wasn't True. https://twitter.com/mrmilitantnegro/status/600130681620955136 …," microblog, *@_Benipedia_*, (May 18, 2015), https://twitter.com/_Benipedia_/status/600131248426586113.
[65] Ron Perlman, "Ron Perlman on Instagram: 'Me Explaining to @_benipedia_ Why I Prefer Acting While Standing on 1 Foot…,'" *Instagram*, accessed May 28, 2015, https://instagram.com/p/3MVRkoonps/.
[66] Tiggett.
[67] Newman interview.
[68] Amanda D. Lotz, *The Television Will Be Revolutionized* (NYU Press, 2007).
[69] Adam Flomenbaum, "How Nielsen Social Is Measuring the Evolution of Social TV," *AdWeek*, January 26, 2015, http://adweek.it/1yVjb0w; Andrew Wallenstein, "Variety to Publish Weekly TV and Film Fan Engagement Measurement Combining All Major Digital Platforms," *Variety*, September 2, 2014, http://variety.com/2014/digital/news/variety-to-publish-weekly-tv-and-film-fan-engagement-measurement-combining-all-major-digital-platforms-1201294076/.
[70] Newman interview.

Conclusion

THE ROAD SO FAR

While television's history of representing religion is almost as long as the medium's history itself, the 1990s stand as a turning point in the way writers of prime-time American television understood and used religious representations. That decade within the neo-network era saw the bifurcation of prime-time television into two broad categories. On one hand, there were shows that cultivated edge through style, sex, violence, language, and other means that would likely offend middlebrow tastes; such programs were most evident on certain cable outlets and on emerging netlets. On the other hand were shows that continued to appeal to the imagined middlebrow mass audience of the classic network era. Where religion appeared on television during this period, it was on shows that epitomized the latter category. *Touched by an Angel* on CBS and *7th Heaven* on the WB were prime examples of 1990s-era middlebrow series. Together, these two shows represented how broadcasting's legacy practices continued to shape new networks' programming.

Both *Touched by an Angel* and *7th Heaven* exemplified certain representations of religion. Religion became associated with specific middlebrow approaches in genre, style, narrative, and iconography. The two shows were perceived as visually uninteresting, generically realist, narratively unimaginative and moralistic, and iconographically middle-of-the-road. Middlebrow became associated with preachiness, placed in opposition to the edginess depicted in quality dramas of the time such as *NYPD Blue* (ABC, 1993-2005), *E.R.* (NBC, 1994-2009), and *Northern Exposure* (CBS,1990-1995). To be preachy, from the perspective of most creatives, was to be deemed an uninspired failure according to the dominant non-religious ideology of mainstream prime-time television practitioners. Furthermore, from the executive perspective, to

target audiences with middlebrow shows was to target those with less discriminating tastes and presumably less spending power as well.

Based on such assumptions, practices developed that were designed to contain religious representations. Through processes of containment, mainstream Hollywood television executives and creatives averted the twin risks of alienating upscale audiences and being perceived as religious. Both *7th Heaven* and *Touched by an Angel*'s reruns, as well as similar family-friendly fare with a preachy sensibility (e.g., *The Guard* [Ion, 2008-2009], *Ties that Bind* [UP, 2015-], *The Secret Life of the American Teenager* [ABC Family, 2008-2013]), continued to appear on niche cable outlets that targeted the middlebrow audience (UP, ION, etc.) during this time and into the present. Thus, this middlebrow strand of programming did not come to an end in the 1990s. Instead, it largely moved to distribution channels that explicitly targeted Christian audiences or audiences of faith. Significantly, a decade later, *Touched by an Angel*'s star, Roma Downey, and her husband, Mark Burnett, began producing Biblical adaptations such as *The Bible* (History, 2013) and *A.D.: The Bible Continues* (NBC, 2015) for cable and broadcast networks. Such programs were not explicitly aimed at religious audiences. Nonetheless, in their depiction of religiously framed morality lessons, such shows perpetuated the link between religious and preachy into the post-network era. *Touched by an Angel* and *7th Heaven,* along with the post-network era Biblical dramas that succeeded them, were shows that functioned as negative reference points, sustaining certain staid and conservative assumptions and practices regarding religious representation on television.

In the post-network era, outlets expanded and program offerings diversified. More cable channels were producing more diverse original dramatic series, creating space for greater experimentation in terms of form, genre, and storytelling. Antiheroes appeared across the

television landscape in series such as *The Sopranos* (HBO, 1999-2007)*, The Shield* (FX, 2002-2008)*, Mad Men* (AMC, 2007-2015)*,* and *Breaking Bad* (AMC, 2008-2013)*;* and their stories featured more sex, violence, nudity, drug use, frank language, and other edgy content than had appeared previously. Starting in 2003, religion was also increasingly represented and was even used to structure narratives and premises. Yet religion was different from the other topics emerging on television at the time. Religion, unlike sexuality, violence, nudity, drug usage, and so on, was not deployed as a means of cultivating edginess until very recently. Though religious television dramas largely abandoned their prior middlebrow associations of preachiness, new industrial and creative strategies were employed to contain religion, and thereby make it safe for storytelling purposes.

The containment strategies that emerged in this programming context were not only textual in nature, but also necessarily extended to the writers' rooms and executive offices, evidenced by the ways creatives spoke (or didn't speak) about religious representation. Such containment strategies have restricted the amount or diversity of religious representations present on television. But these strategies facilitated acceptable ways of presenting religion in mainstream hour-long narratives. Certainly television has a history of containing controversial subjects within quality designations and quality aesthetics or within generic displacement. In the 1960s, new power dynamics of family and gender were explored through fantastic family sitcoms like *Lost in Space* (CBS, 1965-1968) and *Bewitched* (ABC, 1964-1972). Similarly, race and intolerance were portrayed through alien conflicts on *Star Trek* (NBC, 1966-1969).[1] In television programming featuring religious stories and representations, the strategies of containment were more pronounced in terms of the disconnect between the religious concepts

presented on television and the ways that creatives working on those shows spoke about their labor on those shows.

As this study illuminates, from 2003-2016, a boom in television series featuring religious storylines and representations occurred, although it was not seen as such by people within the industry. This boom was shaped by industrial and cultural changes. The invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the resulting centralizing of religious difference in the culture helps to explain why the boom began in 2003, and the persistent dialogue between politics and Christianity amplified the cultural risk for being seen as religious in liberal enclaves like Hollywood. Meanwhile, the television industry struggled with changing technology and the competition posed by the rise of several new streaming distribution outlets and platforms. All of these forces pushed the boom toward a new level of both diversity of representation and more creative acknowledgment of religion. Yet these forces only truly became evident in and around 2015 – and only in a few cases such as *Hand of God* and *Preacher*. In observing such a boom from the outside, one should not presume that creatives had free rein to present religion however they saw fit, nor should one presume that creatives would speak openly about how they chose to present religion. Among those working in television during the post-network era, religion has been regularly contained within certain ideological and ritualistic practices of writers, producers, executives, and marketers. Indeed, journalistic accounts and interviews with creatives scarcely discussed the growing presence of religion on TV, attesting to the degree of containment and the tacit denial that content was religious.

The analysis of ongoing and evolving practices of containment reveal that post-network era television practices maintain certain continuities – legacies traced to practices employed in prior phases of television. Even in the face of vast changes in television as an industry,

technology, and cultural object, religion as programming content continues to evoke hesitancy, caution, and compulsive resort to containment tactics and strategies.

During the course of my study, I identified four different prominent strategies of containment that have evolved within the television industry:

1. Containment of religion by isolating it geographically in the American South as an other that can be authentically represented in quality television dramas. *Friday Night Lights* and *Rectify* served as two case studies that have spanned the boom period and show how religious content has appeared on both broadcast and cable outlets. This containment strategy has enabled creatives working on these shows to represent religion as real Christian practice, but at a distance – geographically and anthropologically. For creatives involved with these shows, the realism and consequent aesthetic appeal to quality TV audiences ensures religious representation in the dramas is not milquetoast, middlebrow, or preachy.
2. Containment of religion by using both quality television designations and fantastic genre conventions. This approach displaces religion using genre conventions that allow creatives to present religion as a vaguer, abstract spirituality. Creatives who worked on *Battlestar Galactica, Lost,* and *The Leftovers* acknowledged religion's social function as faith for their characters and within the show's storyworld. These creatives only spoke of religion in terms of spirituality. Spirituality was suggestive of a vague middle-ground between how the creatives of Southern realist shows such as *Friday Night Lights* and *Rectify* acknowledged religion-qua-religion and how the creatives of non-quality fantastic series such as *Supernatural, Dominion,* and *Sleepy Hollow* outright denied religion's role in their work of religious representation.

3. Containment of religion by deploying fantastic genre conventions in order to discursively deny its religiousness. Within this genre, which includes such shows as *Supernatural, Dominion,* and *Sleepy Hollow,* the religious elements represented do not signify any actual faith or authentic religious practice. To creatives working in this mode, religion becomes mythology – that is, a supernatural narrative structure without religious function. The displacement of religion into mythology coincides with the targeting of the upscale fan audience and to assumptions creatives held that those upscale fans oppose religion. While religion is not safe, mythology is. These strategies of containment create a paradox whereby explicit religious representations take place even as the creatives working on the shows wholly deny religiousness.
4. Containment enabled by drawing from religious narratives present in comic books. In this case, containment of the religious elements has already occurred before the process of television adaptation begins. Among these shows adapted from source texts with religious narratives, there is no fear of being considered preachy or of alienating the upscale fan audience. Creatives working on adaptations of acknowledged religious-themed comic books, including *Constantine, Lucifer,* and *Preacher*, utilize double displacement, a strategy that is part of an environment in which more religious shows can be made, discussed, and marketed. Such displacement is accessible through the discourse of fantastic religious representation as mythology as well as through the displacement of religious stories' origins onto the original comic book's creatives.

The six chapters of this dissertation illustrate that despite radical changes in television as a medium and as an industry, these containment strategies and the ideologies on which they are based persist within the writers' rooms and board rooms. The last case study chapter moved on

to explore whether such strategies and self-policing persisted on newer nonlinear platforms such as streaming sites. Writers for *Hand of God* and *Daredevil*, at least initially, still believed that network and studio executives would meet religious representations with hesitation. In this sense, their perspective echoed the point of view held by *7th Heaven*'s Brenda Hampton and *Battlestar Galactica*'s Ronald D. Moore many years earlier. The ideologies that figure religion as risky among creatives within dramatic television persist. But the favored tendencies of containment deployed during the boom period of 2003 to 2016 may finally be nearing a tipping point. Such a tipping point might involve normalizing religious representations not only onscreen but also in conversations with the press and in intra-industry conversations.

THE TIPPING POINT?

Even as new practices, business models, and industrial relationships emerge within the television industry, the persistence of the old patterns of containment reveals religion as one subject that has changed far less quickly in terms of its televisual representation than other controversial subjects. The delay and resulting different strategies of both representation and creatives' discussion of religion reveals certain ways that television as an industry and medium has not changed as totally as some scholars and journalists claim. As Lisa Gitelman articulates in *Always Already New*, "The introduction of new media . . . is never entirely revolutionary: new media are less points of epistemic rupture than they are socially embedded sites for the ongoing negotiation of meaning as such. Comparing and contrasting new media thus stand to offer a view of negotiability in itself—a view, that is, of the contested relations of force that determine the pathways by which new media may eventually become old hat."[2] In the post-network era, television is a technology and a cultural form that is imbued with discourses of newness by industry creatives, pundits, and academics alike. Gitelman offers a corrective to the idea of

newness as a break, and a counternarrative is important for television of this moment. The discourses of newness are undermined by the long reach of the past in terms of learned ideology among creatives.

Certainly there are a few examples of potential ruptures to creatives' assumption of religion as too risky to tackle or acknowledge (such as Ronald D. Moore's "God is Love" anecdote and the Gages' story of the *Daredevil* showrunner being willing to but not needing to fight for their Catholicism-focused episode) within this study of how the post-Christian sensibility emerges in the television writers' rooms and on screens. Yet much of this ideology has remained intact so far, at least where religion is concerned. So the anti-prediction for this conclusion is that, at least in the short term, the status quo will likely remain dominant, in most instances, for the writers and producers involved with mainstream religious dramatic storytelling. The long-standing practices of religious inoculation within Hollywood culture will likely persist, on most programs and most channels. The post-Christian culture and ideology of the industry persists even in the face of successes such as *Supernatural's* twelve-season run or *Lucifer's* recent success. The hesitancy of addressing religion maintains its hold and will likely be slow to change, especially for those creatives producing for outlets more bound to legacy practices. Christian culture in America is still a large part of how the industry imagines the nation as a mass, if only through audience demographics. And that mass culture is not, for the most part, the culture of the television industry headquartered in Hollywood.

The positioning of *Hand of God* and *Preacher* as edgy (or in the latter's case, potentially edgy) representations of religion illustrates that the industry has very recently experienced a tipping point in which such strategies of containment for religion are no longer *as* necessary. It is possible that these strategies will slowly start to ebb away as they have with sex, violence,

language, drug use, and other mature subjects within the prime-time television industry. Potentially edgy approaches to religious programming are not confined to streaming platforms, and they present a locus of more overt discourse about such approaches due to their industrial positioning as innovators. Streaming platforms may be part of a larger transformation that was not motivated by cable (as was the case with other controversial and edgy subjects) and is instead a long-delayed shift as religion catches up to other aspects of post-network era change. The end to my periodization remains in question, but it seems likely that continuities will continue, for the most part, especially within the discourses of industry creatives. Future work might involve seeing how new shows such as *Preacher* and *Hand of God* and others (e.g., *The Path* [Hulu, 2016-]) evolve.

Religion as Television Industry Studies Anomaly

Each chapter of this dissertation has approached the same general production tactic – avoidance of the religious label – and has considered how that tactic has affected different types of programming in different outlets and contexts. Throughout the boom, creatives have implicitly positioned religion within a paradox: it is potentially controversial, like sex or violence, and thus needs to be carefully approached…but it is also ideologically dangerous within Hollywood ideologies in ways that other controversial or edgy subjects are not. Religion's association with middlebrow pap and sincere messaging in the 1990s places it at a remove from the dominant cultures of prime-time television production that are coastal, elite, and non-religious.

Religious representation and creatives' understanding of their work in relation to religion help us to understand in fresh and distinctive ways how power, ideology, and hegemonic assumptions about audiences and quality shape television texts and their production practices. This study has sought to trace both the continuities and changes of television production norms

during the post-network era. It has done so by using religion as a lens for thinking about television as an industry, as a cultural forum, as a location of production cultures and ideologies, and as a site for imagining American culture through target audiences.[3]

This study provides a counter-narrative—or at least a narrative of significant delay—to dominant analyses of contemporary television that focus on the widespread and consistent normalization of controversial subjects in recent years. While religious representation has been booming on television since 2003, it is only in the last year, with the case of *Hand of God*, that religion has been used to cultivate edge and marketed as a means of starting a conversation about a show. Outside of this one example, the dominant strategies of displacement, abstraction, and denial reveal the limitations of television industrial studies that claim we are in an era of (seemingly) infinite textual possibilities. Only by looking at how creatives understand, or at least discuss, the work that they do with religious representation can we see the constraints that remain regarding presenting religion in mainstream prime-time television dramas. By looking at religion on TV, I have exposed the atavistic structures, ideologies, and legacy practices still in place regarding content creation and marketing practices. These practices within the television industry seem markedly out of place compared to the relatively rapid changes in content standards for nudity, sexuality, violence, and drug use that have occurred since the 1980s. Looking at religion's (dis)place(ment) in contemporary dramas forces us to think more critically about claims made by journalists, critics, or scholars that no content is too risky for post-network era television.

Next Steps

The interview process supporting this study began more than two years ago; not a month has passed since in which a new television show with a religious narrative has not been announced or broadcast. My corpus expanded, but there were practical limits to what I could include, leading to certain recently launched shows falling outside of my purview even when they fit into the context of my study. Examples of shows this work does not analyze include *Damien* (A&E, 2016), a drama about the antichrist picking up twenty years after *The Omen* (Donner, 1976); *Of Kings and Prophets* (ABC, 2016), a sword-and-sandal soap opera adaptation of the Biblical story of Kings Saul and David; and Hulu's *The Path* (2016-) a mystery-drama about a family who join a new religion/possible cult. The recent appearance of all of these shows indicate the continuation of the religious representation boom that has now been shaping dramatic programming across the television landscape for more than a dozen years. There is little sign this boom period will stop or slow down.

One of the unfortunate byproducts of looking at the post-Christian sensibility as it is expressed within this boom period is that the sensibility is primarily white. Because post-Christianity is premised on the normalization to the point of denial of Christianity, it has echoed another dominant ideological construct seen as normal in American culture: whiteness. However, there is a rich recent history of black religious representation on prime-time television in both comedies and dramas. For example, Tyler Perry's vast entertainment empire is largely predicated on and seeks to represent black Christian beliefs and communities. The popular family sitcom *Black-ish* (ABC, 2014-) recently devoted an entire episode to discussing black Christian culture, and *Empire* (Fox, 2014-) incorporated a plotline about one of the three sons in the central music dynasty becoming born-again Christian. On cable, OWN will feature Oprah Winfrey's return to acting in a drama about life within a megachurch when *Greenleaf* premiers in June 2016. These

shows, featuring African-American casts and targeting both black and white audiences, would necessarily provide different understandings of religious representation. Religion on black television is rarely invisible; indeed, it is often portrayed through highlighting difference.

Further expansion of this project could include a study of comedy programs such as *Jane the Virgin* (CW, 2014-), *Enlightened* (HBO, 2011-2013), *Impastor* (TVLand, 2015-), and *The Real O'Neals* (ABC, 2016-). Such a project could explore how comedy is used as a safe space to more thoroughly engage with religious representation as well as how religious representations are raced and classed. Within the realm of comedy, there is an even longer history of religion on American television (e.g., *The Goldbergs* [CBS/NBC, 1948-1955]*, The Flying Nun* [ABC, 1967-1970] Amen [ABC, 1986-1991], and *Nothing Sacred* [ABC, 1997]), and in the post-network era there is an expanding corpus of programs ripe for study, as noted above. For instance, it might be useful to compare angels in comedies to those discussed in the eschatological fantastic dramas of chapter four. Moreover, comedies eschew the containment strategies of dramas more often than not. This genre uses the comedic frame to represent religion as it is: a part of society with both good and bad aspects. For all that comedies make fun of a host of topics, they do tend to take religion seriously.

A view beyond Christianity and post-Christianity would incorporate dramas that problematically but thoroughly engage in representation of Islam or Judaism, such as *Homeland* (Showtime, 2011-) and *Transparent* (Amazon, 2014-), respectively. Such an expansion would illustrate the differences in understanding religious representation when that religion is 1) assumed minority and 2) either foreign or familiar to the creatives' working on those shows. Perhaps representations of Islam would be treated in much the same way that Christianity is used in Southern realist dramas.

One alternate avenue of exploration for the production ideologies and modes of representation this study has chronicled would be to look to reality television. Would reality shows like *Mary, Mary* (We TV, 2012-) or *Preach* (Lifetime, 2015), which follow black gospel singers, reveal counter-narratives to a post-Christian sensibility? How have reality shows like *Preachers of L.A.* (Oxygen, 2013-2014) used or challenged assumptions about docusoaps as a genre and their audience?

Moving beyond text and production context, a possible next step for understanding these practices would be to integrate reception studies for the dramas included in this project to gain a sense of how the religious elements are being read by audiences, whether targeted directly or not. To what extent do the shows addressed in this study appeal to religious audiences? Might they have greater appeal if they were packaged for them? How might middlebrow appeal and quality demographics coexist within the actual audiences of these shows? How much audience research is done but ignored in favor of biases within the industry? Such questions could help further shed light on the negotiation of religious meaning and understanding in television productions. The focus of this study so far has been centered primarily on how religion is represented and how that representation is understood among its creatives. As such, reception studies would usefully add to our understanding of how these representations are decoded among viewers of various demographics, from secular to religious to non-American.

Understanding Post-Christian Television Production

This study started with my bafflement at how shows like *Supernatural* could exist. The show seemed astoundingly blasphemous and risky within a culturally Christian and industrially hesitant broadcast context, yet it wasn't discussed as such or protested. How could *Supernatural* get away with a story that could be easily read as anti-religious? That was the spark. The fuel to

the fire was the increasingly obvious discomfort displayed by industry workers while discussing religious narrative elements even as they work every day on shows that use the Book of Revelation as their guiding premise. That disconnect between representation and the production culture behind it became the driving force of this study and remains the most significant contribution. I studied a subject that seems to be on the rise on the screen but in many ways remains invisible—by design or not—both behind the scenes and in the press. The rise of religion's visibility and simultaneous denial and avoidance among creatives and executives belied a variety of assumptions about changes in content standards, audience targeting, and programming packaging in the post-network era. Yes, to say that Hollywood is hesitant about religion is unsurprising, but to nuance that and say that creatives and executives generally remain hesitant even as they negotiate a variety of ways to make the use of familiar religious story elements is significant. This process of negotiation involves making religion safe for writers to use within the context of their production cultures. It also involves balancing conservativeness in discussing and representing religion against the industry's paradoxical post-network discourses of expansiveness and openness to new modes of storytelling and representation. Studying something new and surprising is essential to maintaining a vibrant critical scholarly field, but as I hope to have shown, there is also value in examining cases that contradict claims of change. Religion has always been common-sense risky for the television industry, to be sure. But I found that from 2003 to 2016, the way it has been articulated as risky has shifted. The underlying ideology in mainstream Hollywood TV seems to be: "Use religion all you want nowadays, but don't explicitly acknowledge you are doing so – that is, unless you and your show are well established in the industry. Otherwise, in such a precarious employment landscape, if you choose to represent religion, you best be sure to contain, displace, or deny its presence."

[1] Lynn Spigel, *Welcome to the Dreamhouse: Popular Media and Postwar Suburbs* (Durham, NC, USA: Duke University Press, 2001); Catherine Johnson, *Telefantasy* (BFI, 2005).
[2] Lisa Gitelman, *Always Already New: Media, History, and the Data of Culture*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), 6.
[3] Horace Newcomb and Paul Hirsch, "Television as Cultural Forum," in *Television: The Critical View,* (New York : Oxford University Press, 2000).

Appendix A: Corpus

Prime-time American television dramas that fit the parameters for this research:

A. <u>Case Studies</u>:

- *7th Heaven* (WB, 1996-2007)
- *Battlestar Galactica* (Sci Fi, 2003-2009)
- *Constantine* (NBC, 2014-2015)
- *Daredevil* (Netflix, 2015-)
- *Dominion* (Syfy, 2014-2015)
- *Friday Night Lights* (NBC, 2006-2011)
- *Hand of God* (Amazon, 2015-)
- *Lost* (ABC, 2004-2011)
- *Lucifer* (Fox, 2016-)
- *Preacher (*AMC, 2016-)
- *Rectify* (SundanceTV, 2013-)
- *Sleepy Hollow* (Fox, 2013-)
- *Supernatural* (WB/CW, 2005-)
- *The Leftovers* (HBO 2014-)
- *Touched by an Angel* (CBS 1994-2003)

B. <u>Other Religious Dramas (with creatives I interviewed):</u>

- *Eli Stone* (ABC, 2008-2009)
- *Resurrection* (ABC, 2014-2015)
- *The Librarians* (TNT, 2014-)

C. <u>Other Religious Dramas (no interviews; partial list):</u>

- *Believe* (NBC, 2014)
- *Joan of Arcadia* (CBS, 2003-2005)
- *John from Cincinnati* (HBO, 2007)
- *Kings* (NBC, 2009)
- *Of Kings and Prophets* (ABC, 2016)
- *The Book of Daniel* (NBC, 2006)
- *The Messengers* (CW, 2015)

Appendix B: Interviews

Anonymous A, staff writer
Anonymous B, staff writer, *Supernatural*
Anonymous C, staff writer, *Sleepy Hollow*
Melissa Bernstein, producer, *Rectify*
Monica Bloom, Senior Vice President Marketing and Digital media, SundanceTV
Brusta Brown and JM Todd, staff writers, *Dominion*
Rio Cyrus, Senior Vice President of Marketing, Fox Home Entertainment
Brian Edwards, COO, United Artists Media Group; producer, *The Bible*
Ruth Fletcher Gage and Christos Gage, staff writers, *Daredevil*
Marc Guggenheim, co-creator and co-showrunner, *Eli Stone*
David Hudgins, writer and producer, *Friday Night Lights*
Jordan Levin, former CEO of WB network
Damon Lindelof, showrunner, *Lost* and *The Leftovers*
Ronald D. Moore, showrunner, *Battlestar Galactica*
Gregg Nations, writer and producer, *Lost*
Carolyn Newman, executive in charge of drama, Amazon Studios
John Rogers, creator and showrunner, *The Librarians*
Bradley Thompson, writer and producer, *Battlestar Galactica*
Mark Verheiden, writer and producer, *Battlestar Galactica* and *Constantine*
Christian Vesper, Senior Vice President Scripted Development, SundanceTV
David Weddle, writer and producer, *Battlestar Galactica*
Aaron Zelman, creator and showrunner, *Resurrection*

Appendix C: Interview Questions

Below are the generalized versions of questions used in interviews.

A. For writer/EPs of shows acting as case studies

1. What was the development process for this show? This (religious) storyline? Does the show have a particular writing process? Are there certain writers who focus on certain types of stories or characters?
2. What is your history as a writer/executive? Your history in television? How does this show compare to other shows you've worked on? Do you find this storyline unique?
3. What are your influences? What shows do you watch/enjoy or feel have helped shaped this show?
4. How do you think of your audience for this show? Who do you consider yourself writing for?
5. Do you use consultants or public relations/focus group research in the development process? What kind of research goes into the writing process? Does any of that research deal particularly with the religious elements?
6. Have you encountered any backlash with regard to the religious elements on the show?
7. What is the show's relationship with the network? Did the network have any noticeable reaction or particular notes regarding the religious story?
8. Why do you think this story works now on television? (Or if it didn't work: Why do you think this story didn't work on television when it aired? Is there a noticeable difference now to when it aired?)

B. For writers (non-executive producers) of shows acting as case studies

1. Where did you enter into the development process of this show? This (religious) storyline?
2. What is your history as a writer? Your history as a television writer? How does this show compare to other shows you've worked on? Do you find this storyline unique?
3. How do you think of your audience for this show? Who do you consider yourself writing for?
4. Do you use consultants or public relations/focus group research in the process of writing? Does any of that research deal particularly with the religious elements?
5. Have you encountered any backlash with regard to the religious elements on the show?

C. For television executives

1. What do you look for when you are developing or picking up new shows?
2. For [case study], what grabbed your attention? Did you encounter any struggles in getting it on the air?
3. How do you/the network think of [case study's] audience? Who watches the show and is its audience different than you would expect?
4. Please describe in broad strokes how the show has been marketed? What kind of viewers does the marketing target?
5. Have you encountered any backlash regarding the religious elements on the show?
6. Did the potential for religious backlash give you pause? How did you/the network/the writers prepare for that?

D. For advertisers/marketers

1. Please describe in broad strokes how the show has been marketed?
2. What kind of viewers does the marketing target? Is the audience for this show different from other shows on the network? If so, how so?
3. Do you work with focus groups to determine what to emphasize in the show's marketing? If so, could you describe a little about that process?
4. If you could use three words to describe the promotional images for the show, what would they be and why?
5. Is there an over-aching sensibility about the marketing of the show? How does that change (or not) season to season?
6. Who makes the decisions about target audience and marketing?
7. One of the things critics have hailed [case study] for is its unique approach to religion and spirituality. Does that play a role in any of your marketing strategies? If so, how so?
8. In my research, I've found mainstream films like *Noah* that have separate marketing strategies for the general public and for religious audiences who might respond to the film's religious elements. Was that ever a consideration for [case study]?
9. [Describe example of religious element clearly in general marketing.] This seemed like a way of marketing the show and acknowledging the spiritual elements that I had not seen. Can you talk about how it came to be?

Bibliography

"*Battlestar Galactica*." *Peabody Awards*. Accessed April 11, 2016. http://www.peabodyawards.com/award-profile/battlestar-galactica.

"Does NPR Have a Liberal Bias?" *Columbia Journalism Review*, March 15, 2011. http://www.cjr.org/news_meeting/does_npr_have_a_liberal_bias.php.

"From 'Lost' To 'Leftovers', Show Creators Embrace Ambiguity And The Unknown." *NPR.org*. Accessed April 12, 2016. http://www.npr.org/2015/12/02/458143133/from-lost-to-leftovers-show-creators-embrace-ambiguity-and-the-unknown.

"Netflix Is Now Available Around the World." *Netflix Media Center*, January 6, 2016. https://media.netflix.com/en/press-releases/netflix-is-now-available-around-the-world.

"'No Religion' on the Rise: 19.6% Have No Religious Affiliation - Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life," October 9, 2012. http://www.pewforum.org/Unaffiliated/nones-on-the-rise.aspx.

"Public Radio Audience Demographics - NPR Profiles." *National Public Media*. Accessed May 18, 2015. http://nationalpublicmedia.com/npr/audience/.

"Ratings - *Smallville* and '*Supernatural'* on the Rise, Performing at Or Near Season Highs | TheFutonCritic.com." *Futon Critic*, October 31, 2008. http://www.thefutoncritic.com/ratings/2008/10/31/smallville-and-supernatural-on-the-rise-performing-at-or-near-season-highs-29378/20081031cw01/.

"*Sleepy Hollow* Bosses Find Inspiration in the Bible." *TV Guide*. Accessed January 15, 2014. http://www.tvguide.com/news/sleepy-hollow-alex-kurtzman-roberto-orci-1070348.aspx.

"*The Shield*." *Peabody Awards*. Accessed April 11, 2016. http://www.peabodyawards.com/award-profile/the-shield.

"The Tea Party and Religion." *Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project*, February 23, 2011. http://www.pewforum.org/2011/02/23/tea-party-and-religion/.

"Touched by an Angel." *Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia*, June 20, 2016. https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Touched_by_an_Angel&oldid=726176089.

"Valenti: TV Reducing Violence." *Variety*, November 8, 1993. http://variety.com/1993/tv/columns/valenti-tv-reducing-violence-115701/.

Adalian, Josef. "Anatomy of a Hit: Why *Sleepy Hollow* Became Fall TV's Breakout Success." *Vulture*, October 14, 2013. http://www.vulture.com/2013/10/why-fox-sleepy-hollow-breakout-hit.html.

---. "There Were Over 400 Scripted TV Shows on the Air in 2015." *Vulture*, December 16, 2015. http://www.vulture.com/2015/12/scripted-tv-shows-2015.html.

Adalian, Josef, and Maria Elena Fernandez. “The Business of Too Much TV.” *Vulture*, May 18, 2016. http://www.vulture.com/2016/05/peak-tv-business-c-v-r.html.
Ahmed, Maaheen, and Martin Lund. “Apocalypse Why? The Neutralisation of the Antichrist in Three Comics Adaptations.” *Scan | Journal of Media Arts Culture* 9, no. 1 (2012). http://scan.net.au/scn/journal/vol9number1/Maaheen-Ahmed-and-Martin-Lund.html.
Albanesius, Chloe. “Hulu Inks Distribution Deal for Original Shows.” *PCMAG*, March 12, 2012. http://www.pcmag.com/article2/0,2817,2401453,00.asp.
Allstetter, Rob. “Mark Steven Johnson: No *Preacher* on HBO.” *Comics Continuum*, August 25, 2008. http://www.comicscontinuum.com/stories/0808/25/index.htm?loc=interstitialskip.
Anders, Charlie Jane. “The Biggest Winners And Losers Of Comic-Con 2015!” *io9*, July 13, 2015. http://io9.com/the-biggest-winners-and-losers-of-comic-con-2015-1717547126.
Andersen, Kurt. “I Want My HBO.” *NYMag.com*, 2004. http://nymag.com/nymetro/news/columns/imperialcity/12199/.
Andreeva, Nellie. “‘Constantine’ Cancelled By NBC, Will It Find New Life Elsewhere?.” *Deadline*, May 8, 2015. http://deadline.com/2015/05/constantine-cancelled-nbc-life-elsewhere-1201423289/.
---. “‘Lucifer’, ‘Rosewood’ Renewed For Season 2 By Fox, Who’s Still On the Bubble There?.” *Deadline*, April 7, 2016. http://deadline.com/2016/04/lucifer-rosewood-renewed-season-2-fox-sleepy-hollow-grandfathered-the-grinder-new-girl-1201733778/.
---. “Full 2011-2012 TV Season Series Rankings.” *Deadline*, May 25, 2012. http://deadline.com/2012/05/full-2011-2012-tv-season-series-rankings-277941/.
---. “Full Series Rankings For The 2009-10 Broadcast Season.” *Deadline*, May 28, 2010. http://deadline.com/2010/05/full-series-rankings-for-the-2009-10-broadcast-season-44277/.
Ang, Ien. *Desperately Seeking the Audience*. London: Routledge, 1991.
Ang, Ien. *Living Room Wars: Rethinking Media Audiences for a Postmodern World*. New York: Routledge, 1996.
Appelo, Tim. “Emmys: How AMC Became HBO’s Nightmare.” *The Hollywood Reporter*, June 18, 2011. http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/emmys-how-amc-became-hbos-203084.
Arceneaux, Kevin, and Stephen P. Nicholson. “Who Wants to Have a Tea Party? The Who, What, and Why of the Tea Party Movement.” *PS: Political Science and Politics* 45, no. 4 (2012): 700–710.
Baker-Whitelaw, Gavia. “Decoding the Artistic Inspiration behind ‘Daredevil’s Gorgeous Season 2 Posters.” *The Daily Dot*, March 15, 2016. http://www.dailydot.com/geek/daredevil-season-2-caravaggio-posters/.
Balderston, Michael. “SXSW: Seth Rogen and Evan Goldberg on Their Pilots at HBO, AMC and FX (Video).” *TheWrap*, March 10, 2014.

http://www.thewrap.com/seth-rogen-evan-goldberg-developing-pilots-hbo-amc-fx/.
Banet-Weiser, Sarah. *Authentic TM: The Politics and Ambivalence in a Brand Culture*. New York: NYU Press, 2012.
Barker, Cory. "Sophomore Jump: How The Leftovers Became the Best Show on TV." *TV.com*, December 3, 2015. http://www.tv.com/shows/the-leftovers/community/post/the-leftovers-season-2-improvement-144907112784/.
Baron, Steve. "Live+7 Ratings: Complete 2014-15 Season 'The Big Bang Theory' Leads Adults 18-49 Ratings Increase; 'The Messengers' Earns Biggest Percentage Increase, 'The Blacklist' Tops Viewership Gains." *TV By The Numbers by zap2it.com*, June 8, 2015. http://tvbythenumbers.zap2it.com/2015/06/08/live7-dvr-ratings-complete-2014-15-season-the-big-bang-theory-leads-adults-18-49-ratings-increase-raising-hope-earns-biggest-percentage-increase-the-blacklist-tops-viewership-gains/.
Baumgartner, Jeff. "Netflix Has Lowest Churn Rate Among OTT Services: Study." *Multichannel News*, April 14, 2016. http://www.multichannel.com/news/content/netflix-has-lowest-churn-rate-among-ott-services-study/404142.
Becker, Ron. "Prime-Time Television in the Gay Nineties." In *The Television Studies Reader*, edited by Annette Hill and Allen, Robert C. Psychology Press, 2004.
Bekakos, Liana. "*Supernatural* Creator Eric Kripke Answers Fan's Questions – Part III." *Eclipse Magazine*. Accessed April 12, 2016. http://eclipsemagazine.com/supernatural-creator-eric-kripke-answers-fan%E2%80%99s-questions-%E2%80%93-part-iii/.
Bellafante, Ginia. "A 'Friday Night Lights' Farewell." *ArtsBeat*, July 16, 2011. http://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/07/16/a-friday-night-lights-farewell/.
Bercovici, Jeff. "Science Settles It: NPR's Liberal, But Not Very." *Forbes*, March 22, 2011. http://www.forbes.com/sites/jeffbercovici/2011/03/22/science-settles-it-nprs-liberal-but-not-very/.
Bianco, Robert. "A Good Season, with Reason." *USAToday.com*, April 27, 2005. http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/life/television/news/2005-04-26-tv-lookback_x.htm.
Bottomley, Andrew J. "Quality TV and the Branding of U.S. Network Television: Marketing and Promoting *Friday Night Lights*." *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 32, no. 5 (July 4, 2015): 482–97. doi:10.1080/10509208.2015.1031624.
Bourdieu, Pierre, and Randal Johnson. *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*. Columbia University Press, 1993.
Brunsdon, Charlotte. "Problems with Quality." *Screen*, no. 31 (1990): 67–90.
Bryant, Jacob. "David Goyer Doesn't Think 'Constantine' Should Have Ended Up At NBC." *Variety*, October 20, 2015. http://variety.com/2015/tv/news/constantine-david-goyer-nbc-arrow-cameo-1201622606/.
Bunting, Sarah D. "On The Sixth Day - Rectify." *Previously.TV*, May 21, 2013. http://previously.tv/rectify/on-the-sixth-day/.

Burke, Liam. *The Comic Book Film Adaptation: Exploring Modern Hollywood's Leading Genre*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2015.
Burnett, Mark. "Mark Burnett Op-Ed: 'A.D.' Producer on Faith and Hollywood." *The Hollywood Reporter*, April 3, 2015. http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/mark-burnett-op-ed-ad-786225.
Caldwell, John T. "Cultures of Production; Studying Industry's Deep Texts, Reflexive Rituals, and Managed Self-Disclosures." In *Media Industries: History, Theory, and Method*, edited by Jennifer Holt and Alisa Perren, 1st ed., 199–212. New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.
---. *Televisuality: Style, Crisis, and Authority in American Television*. Rutgers University Press, 1995.
---. *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television*. Duke University Press, 2008.
Callahan, Maureen. "TV Shows Are Going Way Too Far to Attract Viewers." *New York Post*, April 10, 2016. http://nypost.com/2016/04/10/in-a-race-to-outshock-the-viewer-quality-shows-become-ever-more-immoral/.
Carol Memmott. "History Channel Comes out Shootin'." *USA Today*. Accessed March 31, 2016. http://ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nfh&AN=J0E269345227512&site=ehost-live.
Chitwood, Adam. "Evan Goldberg Talks AMC PREACHER TV Series, THE INTERVIEW, and CONSOLE WARS." *Collider*, March 9, 2014. http://collider.com/preacher-tv-news-evan-goldberg/.
Chow-White, Peter A., Danielle Deveau, and Philippa Adams. "Media Encoding in Science Fiction Television: Battlestar Galactica as a Site of Critical Cultural Production." *Media, Culture & Society*, July 22, 2015, 0163443715594031. doi:10.1177/0163443715594031.
Clark, Lynn Schofield. "You Lost Me: Mystery, Fandom, and Religion in ABC's Lost." In *Small Screen, Big Picture: Television and Lived Religion*, edited by Diane Winston, 319–41. Baylor University Press, 2009.
Clarke, Scott H. "Created in Whose Image? Religious Characters on Network Television." *Journal of Media & Religion* 4, no. 3 (July 2005): 137–53. doi:10.1207/s15328415jmr0403_2.
Collis, Clark. "Why the 'Preacher' Producers Trashed Their Original Plans for the Show." *Entertainment Weekly's EW.com*, May 13, 2016. http://www.ew.com/article/2016/05/13/preacher-seth-rogen-trashed-plans.
Curtin, Michael. "Matrix Media." In *Television Studies After TV : Understanding Television in the Post-Broadcast Era*, edited by Graeme Turner and Jinna Tay, 1st ed. Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2009.
---. "On Edge: Culture Industries in the Neo Network Era." In *The Media Studies Reader*, edited by Laurie Ouellette, First edition. New York: Routledge, 2013.

Cusey, Rebeccca. “Friday Night Gets Religion.” *National Review Online*, October 5, 2007. http://www.nationalreview.com/article/222408/friday-night-gets-religion-rebecca-cusey.
Daniels, Susanne, and Cynthia Littleton. *Season Finale: The Unexpected Rise and Fall of the WB and UPN*. New York: Harper Collins, 2007.
Deuze, Mark. *Media Work*. Digital Media and Society Series. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007.
Dony, Christophe. “The rewriting ethos of the Vertigo imprint: critical perspectives on memory-making and canon formation in the American comics field.” *Comicalités. Études de culture graphique*, April 18, 2014. http://comicalites.revues.org/1918.
Douthat, Ross. “The Changing Culture War.” *The New York Times*, December 6, 2010. http://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/06/opinion/06douthat.html.
Durkheim, Emile. “The Social as Sacred.” In *Introducing Religion: Readings from the Classic Theorists*, edited by Daniel L. Pals. Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2009.
Easton, Anne. “‘Hand of God’ Creator on the Personal Grief That Shaped His Dark Amazon Series.” *Observer*, September 3, 2015. http://observer.com/2015/09/hand-to-god-creator-on-the-personal-grief-that-shaped-his-dark-amazon-series/.
Eberl, Jason T., and Jennifer A. Vines. ““I Am an Instrument of God“: Religious Belief, Atheism, and Meaning.” In *Battlestar Galactica and Philosophy*, edited by Jason T. Eberl, 155–68. Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2007. http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/9780470696460.ch13/summary.
Ebert, Roger. “Constantine Movie Review & Film Summary (2005) | Roger Ebert.” Accessed April 16, 2016. http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/constantine-2005.
Eliade, Mircea. “Religion as Response to the Sacred.” In *Introducing Religion: Readings from the Classic Theorists*, edited by Daniel L. Pals. Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2009.
Fallows, James. “Bush’s Lost Year.” *The Atlantic*, October 2004. http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2004/10/bushs-lost-year/303507/.
Feuer, Jane, Paul Kerr, and Tise Vahimagi. *MTM: Quality Television*. London: BFI, 1984.
Fish, Stanley. “One University Under God?” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 7, 2005. https://chronicle.com/article/One-University-Under-God-/45077/.
Flacy, Mike. “Netflix Cuts Deal for Supernatural and Other CW Shows.” *Digital Trends*, October 13, 2011. http://www.digitaltrends.com/home-theater/netflix-cuts-deal-for-supernatural-and-other-cw-shows/.
Flomenbaum, Adam. “How Nielsen Social Is Measuring the Evolution of Social TV,” January 26, 2015. http://adweek.it/1yVjb0w.
Forkan. “Comedy, FX Lead Push to Racy.” *Multichannel News* 20 (September 21, 1999): 30A.

Fowler, Matt. “Syfy Looking to Get Back to Battlestar Galactica-Quality Sci-Fi.” *IGN*, October 30, 2014. http://www.ign.com/articles/2014/10/30/syfy-looking-to-get-back-to-battlestar-galactica-quality-sci-fi.

Franklin, Nancy. “The Heart of Texas.” *The New Yorker*, October 8, 2007. http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2007/10/08/the-heart-of-texas.

Fuller, Jennifer. “Branding Blackness on US Cable Television.” *Media, Culture & Society* 32, no. 2 (March 1, 2010): 285–305. doi:10.1177/0163443709355611.

Gaiman, Neil. “‘One Million Moms’ Says New Fox TV Series ‘Lucifer’ ‘Mocks the Bible,’ Starts Petition Urging for Show’s Cancellation.” Tumblr. *Neil-Gaiman.tumblr.com*, May 29, 2015. http://neil-gaiman.tumblr.com/post/120223970701/one-million-moms-says-new-fox-tv-series.

Gajewski, Ryan. “Emmys: ‘Transparent’s’ Jeffrey Tambor, Jill Soloway Speak Out About Transgender Issues.” *The Hollywood Reporter*, September 20, 2015. http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/emmys-transparents-jeffrey-tambor-jill-825280.

Gardella, Peter. *American Angels: Useful Spirits in the Material World*. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2007.

Gitelman, Lisa. *Always Already New: Media, History, and the Data of Culture*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006.

Gitlin, Todd. “Prime Time Ideology: The Hegemonic Process of Television Entertainment.” In *Television: The Critical View*, edited by Horace Newcomb. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.

---. *Inside Prime Time: With a New Introduction*. 1st ed. University of California Press, 2000.

Goodman, Tim. “Tim Goodman: How to Not Get Canceled in the New World of Television.” *The Hollywood Reporter*, October 8, 2015. http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/bastard-machine/tim-goodman-how-not-get-830807.

Gornstein, Leslie. “Is Scorsese’s HBO Show the Most Expensive Ever?” *E! Online*, January 19, 2010. http://www.eonline.com/news/162826/is-scorsese-s-hbo-show-the-most-expensive-ever.

Gray, Jonathan, and Amanda D. Lotz. *Television Studies*. Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2012.

Gray, Jonathan. *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts*. NYU Press, 2010.

Grindstaff, Laura. *The Money Shot: Trash, Class, and the Making of TV Talk Shows*. 1st ed. University Of Chicago Press, 2002.

Guthrie, Marisa “Syfy’s Two-Pronged Rebrand Strategy.” *Broadcasting & Cable*, June 21, 2009. http://www.broadcastingcable.com/news/programming/syfys-two-pronged-rebrand-strategy/34994.

---. “HBO Inks Exclusive Deal With Amazon Prime.” *The Hollywood Reporter*, April 23, 2014. http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/hbo-inks-deal-amazon-prime-698379.
Guthrie, Marisa. “HBO Not ‘Hung’ Up on Decision-Making.” *Broadcasting & Cable* 139, no. 23 (June 8, 2009): 34–34.
Habermas, Jürgen. “Notes on Post-Secular Society.” *New Perspectives Quarterly* 25, no. 4 (September 1, 2008): 17–29. doi:10.1111/j.1540-5842.2008.01017.x.
Haithman, Diane. “‘Grimm’ Producers Consider What Makes A ‘Breakout Hit’ And The Friday Night Curse: TCA.” *Deadline*, January 6, 2013. http://deadline.com/2013/01/grimm-nbc-tca-david-greenwalt-jim-kouf-397819/.
Hale, Mike. “Steven Van Zandt in Norwegian Netflix Series ‘Lilyhammer.’” *The New York Times*, February 5, 2012. http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/06/arts/television/steven-van-zandt-in-norwegian-netflix-series-lilyhammer.html.
Hansen, Regina M. “Deconstructing the Apocalypse? Supernatural’s Postmodern Appropriation of Angelic Hierarchies.” In *Supernatural, Humanity, and the Soul*, edited by Susan A. George and Regina M. Hansen, 13–26. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.
Havens, Timothy. “Media Programming in an Era of Big Data.” *Media Industries* 1, no. 2 (September 15, 2014). http://www.mediaindustriesjournal.org/index.php/mij/article/view/43.
Hendershot, Heather. “’You Know How It Is with Nuns . . . ‘ Religion and Television’s Sacred/Secular Fetuses.” In *Small Screen, Big Picture: Television and Lived Religion*, edited by Diane Winston, 201–32. Baylor University Press, 2009.
---. *Shaking the World for Jesus: Media and Conservative Evangelical Culture*. University of Chicago Press, 2010.
Hesmondhalgh, David, and Sarah Baker. *Creative Labour: Media Work in Three Cultural Industries*. 1st ed. Routledge, 2011.
Hesmondhalgh, David. “Bourdieu, the Media and Cultural Production.” *Media, Culture & Society* 28, no. 2 (March 1, 2006): 211–31. doi:10.1177/0163443706061682.
Hibberd, James. “‘Constantine’ Team on Why NBC Character Isn’t Bisexual, Smoking Cigarettes | EW.com,” July 13, 2014. http://www.ew.com/article/2014/07/13/constantine-bisexual-smoking.
---. “Syfy Plans to Lure You Back with These 5 Shows.” *Entertainment Weekly’s EW.com*, October 28, 2014. http://www.ew.com/article/2014/10/28/syfy.
Highfill, Samantha. “MGM Is Once Again Launching the United Artists Media Group | EW.com,” September 22, 2014. http://www.ew.com/article/2014/09/22/mgm-united-artists-media-group.
Hills, Matthew. “Media Fandom, Neoreligiosity, and Cult(ural) Studies.” *Velvet Light Trap: A Critical Journal of Film & Television*, no. 46 (Fall 2000).
Hills, Matthew. *Fan Cultures*. New York: Routledge, 2004.
Hilmes, Michele. *Only Connect: A Cultural History of Broadcasting in America.* 2nd ed. Florence, KY: Cenage Learning, 2006.

Himberg, Julia. “Multicasting Lesbian Programming and the Changing Landscape of Cable TV.” *Television & New Media* 15, no. 4 (May 1, 2014): 289–304. doi:10.1177/1527476412474351.
Hipes, Patrick. “‘Killing Jesus’ Premiere Date Set For March 29 On Nat Geo - Full Trailer.” *Deadline*, February 18, 2015. http://deadline.com/2015/02/killing-jesus-premiere-date-trailer-national-geographic-channel-1201375969/.
Holt, Douglas B. “Distinction in America? Recovering Bourdieu’s Theory of Tastes from Its Critics.” *Poetics*, Changing Representation of Status through Taste Displays, 25, no. 2–3 (November 1997): 93–120. doi:10.1016/S0304-422X(97)00010-7.
Holt, Jennifer. “*NYPD Blue*: Content Regulation.” In *How To Watch Television*, edited by Ethan Thompson and Jason Mittell, 271–80. New York: NYU Press, 2013.
---. *Empires of Entertainment: Media Industries and the Politics of Deregulation, 1980-1996*. Rutgers University Press, 2011.
Hoover, Stewart M. “Visual Religion in Media Culture.” In *The Visual Culture of American Religions*, edited by David Morgan and Sally M. Promey, 146–59. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001.
Howell, Charlotte E. “God, the Devil, and John Winchester: Failures of Patriarchy in *Supernatural*.” In *Supernatural, Humanity, and the Soul*, edited by Susan A. George and Regina M. Hansen, 13–26. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.
Hughes, Sarah. “Why *Friday Night Lights* Is One of the Best US Shows of Recent Years.” *The Guardian*, February 13, 2012, sec. Television & radio. http://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/tvandradioblog/2012/feb/13/friday-night-lights.
Hutcheon, Linda. *A Theory of Adaptation*. New York: Routledge, 2006.
Ioannidou, Elisavet. “Adapting Superhero Comics for the Big Screen: Subculture for the Masses.” *Adaptation* 6, no. 2 (August 1, 2013): 230–38. doi:10.1093/adaptation/apt004.
Itzkoff, Dave. “Comics’ Mother of ‘the Weird Stuff’ Is Moving On.” *The New York Times*, May 29, 2013. http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/30/books/comics-mother-of-the-weird-stuff-is-moving-on.html.
Jameson, Freidric. “Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism.” In *Media and Cultural Studies: Key Works,* edited by Douglas M. Kellner and Meenakshi Gigi Durham, Revised ed. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006.
Jaramillo, Deborah L. “AMC Stumbling toward a New Television Canon.” *Television & New Media* 14, no. 2 (March 1, 2013): 167–83. doi:10.1177/1527476412442105.
---. “The Family Racket: AOL Time Warner, HBO, *The Sopranos*, and the Construction of a Quality Brand.” *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 26, no. 1 (January 1, 2002): 59–75. doi:10.1177/0196859902026001005.
Jenkins, Henry, Joshua Benjamin Green, and Sam Ford. *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture*. New York: NYU Press, 2012.
Jenkins, Henry. *Convergence Culture*. New York: New York University Press, 2006.
Jensen, Elizabeth. “WB’s ‘7th Heaven’ a Hush-Hush Hit.” *Los Angeles Times*, February 22, 1999. http://articles.latimes.com/1999/feb/22/entertainment/ca-10415.

Johnson, Catherine. *Telefantasy*. British Film Institute, 2005.
Johnson, Ted. "New Campaign Addresses Violence in Media." *Variety*, February 27, 2013. http://variety.com/2013/tv/news/new-campaign-addresses-violence-in-media-820084/.
Johnson, Victoria E. *Heartland TV: Prime Time Television and the Struggle for U.S. Identity*. NYU Press, 2008.
---. "The Persistence of Geographic Myth in a Convergent Media Era." *Journal of Popular Film & Television* 38, no. 2 (June 2010): 58–65.
---. "Welcome Home?: CBS, PAX-TV, and 'Heartland' Values in a Neo-Network Era." *Velvet Light Trap: A Critical Journal Of Film & Television*, no. 46 (Fall 2000): 40–55.
Kackman, Michael. "Flow Favorites: Quality Television, Melodrama, and Cultural Complexity." *Flow*, 2010. http://www.flowjournal.org/2010/03/flow-favorites-quality-television-melodrama-and-cultural-complexity-michael-kackman-university-of-texas-austin/.
Kaiser, Rowan. "Syfy Is De-Rebranding and It's the Most Compelling Thing on TV." *Inverse*, November 19, 2015. https://www.inverse.com/article/8354-syfy-is-releasing-a-film-de-rebranding-and-becoming-super-interesting.
Kaveney, Roz. *Superheroes!: Capes and Crusaders in Comics and Films*. London ; New York: I. B. Tauris, 2008.
Keegan, Cael. "Op-Ed: How Transparent Tried and Failed to Represent Trans Men | Advocate.com." *Advocate*, October 22, 2014. http://www.advocate.com/commentary/2014/10/22/op-ed-how-transparent-tried-and-failed-represent-trans-men.
Kissell, Rick. "ABC Family's 'The Fosters' Surges in Second Week; Did Controversy Help?." *Variety*, June 11, 2013. http://variety.com/2013/tv/news/abc-familys-the-fosters-surges-in-second-week-did-controversy-help-1200495502/.
---. "History Scores Big With 'The Bible' and 'The Vikings.'" *Variety*, March 4, 2013. http://variety.com/2013/tv/ratings/history-scores-big-with-the-bible-and-the-vikings-1200002918/.
---. "NBC's 'Constantine' Solid in Premiere Opposite World Series." *Variety*, October 25, 2014. http://variety.com/2014/tv/ratings/nbcs-constantine-solid-in-premiere-opposite-world-series-1201339131/.
---. "Ratings: 'A.D. The Bible Continues' Drops Off, But Still Tops Demos." *Variety*, April 13, 2015. http://variety.com/2015/data/news/a-d-the-bible-continues-ratings-week-2-1201471277/.
---. "Ratings: Fox's 'The X-Files' Tops Monday in Demo, Boosts 'Lucifer' to Hot Premiere." *Variety*, January 26, 2016. http://variety.com/2016/tv/news/ratings-the-x-files-monday-premiere-fox-lucifer-hot-1201688915/.
---. "Ratings: Fox's 'X-Files,' 'Lucifer' Down in Week Two, Still Top Night in Demo." *Variety*, February 2, 2016. http://variety.com/2016/tv/news/ratings-fox-x-files-lucifer-down-in-week-two-1201694762/.
---. "Upscale Viewers Flock to ABC." *Variety* 428, no. 11 (October 22, 2012): 27–27.

Klassen, Chris. “Research Note: Rejecting Monotheism? Polytheism, Pluralism, and *Battlestar Galactica*.” *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 23, no. 3 (October 2008): 355–62.
Kompare, Derek. “‘More ’Moments of Television": Online Cult Television Authorship.” In *Flow TV: Television in the Age of Media Convergence*, edited by Michael Kackman, Marnie Binfield, Matthew Thomas Payne, Allison Perlman, and Bryan Sebok. Routledge, 2010.
---. “Publishing Flow DVD Box Sets and the Reconception of Television.” *Television & New Media* 7, no. 4 (November 1, 2006): 335–60.
---. *Rerun Nation : How Repeats Invented American Television*. 1st ed. Florence: Taylor and Francis, 2006.
Koonse, Emma. “‘Rectify’ Series Creator Ray McKinnon Talks Television, Redemption, and the Future for Daniel Holden.” *The Christian Post*, July 10, 2014. http://www.christianpost.com/news/rectify-series-creator-ray-mckinnon-talks-television-redemption-and-the-future-for-daniel-holden-123104/.
Lafayette, Jon. “Buyers Sense a Competitive Market Ahead.” *Television Week* 24, no. 17 (April 25, 2005): 22–24.
Lagerwey, Jorie. “Are You There, God? It’s Me, TV: Religion in American TV Drama, 2000-2009.” Dissertation, University of Southern California, 2009. http://digitallibrary.usc.edu/cdm/ref/collection/p15799coll3/id/227570.
Lauzen, Martha. “Diversity in Prime Time: Not a Priority for the Networks.” *Television Quarterly* 33, no. 4 (Spring 2003): 34–39.
Lavender-Smith, Jordan. “Networking Families: Battlestar Galactica and the Values of Quality.” *Flow*, 2009. http://www.flowjournal.org/2009/12/networking-families-battlestar-galactica-and-the-values-of-quality-jordan-lavender-smith-city-university-of-new-york/.
Lentz, Kirsten Marthe. “Quality Versus Relevance: Feminism, Race, And The Politics Of The Sign In 1970S Television.” *Camera Obscura* 15, no. 1 (2000): 44–93.
Levine, Elana. “Toward a Paradigm for Media Production Research: Behind the Scenes at General Hospital.” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 18, no. 1 (2001): 66–82. doi:10.1080/15295030109367124.
Lieberman, David. “Hulu Introduces $11.99 Commercial-Free Option, But Vows To Boost Ad Sales.” *Deadline*, September 2, 2015. http://deadline.com/2015/09/hulu-ad-free-service-1201512438/.
Littleton, Cynthia. “Birth of the CW: UPN-WB Network Merger Deal Rocked TV Biz 10 Years Ago.” *Variety*, January 24, 2016. http://variety.com/2016/tv/news/cw-wb-network-upn-merger-announcement-10-years-ago-1201687040/.
---. “Fox Aims for Men with Four Drama Series Orders.” *Variety*, May 9, 2013. http://variety.com/2013/tv/news/fox-orders-four-dramas-series-for-2013-14-1200478203/.
---. “Mark Burnett and One Three Media Eye Bigger, Bolder Productions.” *Variety*, September 17, 2013. http://variety.com/2013/biz/news/mark-burnett-and-his-one-three-media-eye-bigger-bolder-productions-1200613995/.

---. “NBC Execs on Broadcast Vs. Cable, Emmy Awards, Thursday Night Struggles.” *Variety*, July 13, 2014. http://variety.com/2014/tv/news/nbc-renews-americas-got-talent-ninja-warrior-last-comic-standing-1201261837/.
---. “Roma Downey Pursues Passion Projects, ‘Bible’ Sequel With LightWorkers Banner.” *Variety*, September 17, 2013. http://variety.com/2013/biz/news/roma-downey-pursues-passion-projects-bible-sequel-with-lightworkers-banner-1200614054/.
Long, Stephanie Topacio. “Viewers Think Daredevil Is Bloody Good, as the Show Takes Netflix’s Number One Spot.” *Digital Trends*, May 28, 2015. http://www.digitaltrends.com/movies/daredevil-top-rated-show-on-netflix/.
Lotz, Amanda D. “Industry-Level Studies and the Contributions of Gitlin’s Inside Prime TIme.” In *Production Studies: Cultural Studies of Media Industries*, edited by Vicki Mayer, Miranda J. Banks, and John T. Caldwell, 25–38. Routledge, 2009.
---. *The Television Will Be Revolutionized*. NYU Press, 2007.
Lowry, Brian. “TV Review: ‘Constantine.’” *Variety*, October 22, 2014. http://variety.com/2014/tv/reviews/tv-review-constantine-1201331412/.
Lubin, Gus Lubin. “‘Daredevil’ Is the Top-Rated Show on Netflix, and These Highlights Show Why.” *Business Insider*, May 22, 2015. http://www.businessinsider.com/daredevil-is-the-top-rated-show-on-netflix-2015-5.
Luckerson, Victor, and Matthew Lee. “Netflix Accounts for More Than a Third of All Internet Traffic.” *Time*, May 29, 2015. http://time.com/3901378/netflix-internet-traffic/?utm_content=bufferc3f54&utm_medium=social&utm_source=linkedin.com&utm_campaign=buffer.
Lynch, Jason. “Why Some Low-Rated TV Shows Keep Getting Renewed.” *AdWeek*. Accessed May 16, 2016. http://www.adweek.com/news/television/why-some-low-rated-tv-shows-keep-getting-renewed-164648.
Maglio, Tony. “Netflix’s Push to Own Original Series Fuels Race to ‘Out-HBO’ HBO.” *TheWrap*, April 24, 2015. http://www.thewrap.com/netflix-push-into-owning-original-series-fuels-race-to-out-hbo-the-premium-network/.
Mallon, Thomas, and Pankaj Mishra. “Highbrow, Lowbrow, Middlebrow — Do These Kinds of Cultural Categories Mean Anything Anymore?” *The New York Times*, July 29, 2014. http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/03/books/review/highbrow-lowbrow-middlebrow-do-these-kinds-of-cultural-categories-mean-anything-anymore.html.
Malone, Michael. “TCA: ‘Visionary Creators’ Wanted, Says Amazon’s Price.” Broadcasting & Cable, January 11, 2016. http://www.broadcastingcable.com/news/programming/tca-visionary-creators-wanted-says-amazon-s-price/146863.
Mann, Denise. “It’s Not TV, It’s Brand Management.” In *Production Studies: Cultural Studies of Media Industries*, edited by Vicki Mayer, Miranda J. Banks, and John T. Caldwell. Routledge, 2009.

Marechal, A. J. “Olympics Viewers to Get Taste of ‘New Normal.’” *Variety*, August 11, 2012. http://variety.com/2012/tv/news/olympics-viewers-to-get-taste-of-new-normal-9193/.

Marwick, Alice E., and Danah Boyd. “I Tweet Honestly, I Tweet Passionately: Twitter Users, Context Collapse, and the Imagined Audience.” *New Media & Society* 13, no. 1 (February 2011): 114–33. doi:10.1177/1461444810365313.

Matthews, Donald G. “Introduction.” In *Religion in the American South*, edited by Beth Barton Schweiger and Donald G. Matthews. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004.

Mayer, Vicki. “Studying Up and F**cking Up: Ethnographic Interviewing in Production Studies.” *Cinema Journal* 47, no. 2 (2007): 141–48. doi:10.1353/cj.2008.0007.

McCracken, Brett. “Saying Farewell to the Best Show on TV.” *RELEVANT Magazine*, July 14, 2011. http://www.relevantmagazine.com/culture/tv/features/26184-saying-farewell-to-the-best-show-on-tv.

McDannell, Colleen. *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995.

McDermon, Daniel. “‘The Leftovers’ Recap: What Happened to Gladys.” *ArtsBeat*, 1406541640. http://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/07/28/the-leftovers-recap-what-happened-to-gladys/.

Mcgrath, Charles. “The Triumph of the Prime-Time Novel.” *The New York Times*, October 22, 1995, sec. Magazine. http://www.nytimes.com/1995/10/22/magazine/the-prime-time-novel-the-triumph-of-the-prime-time-novel.html.

McMinn, Lisa. “Y2K, The Apocalypse, and Evangelical Christianity: The Role of Eschatological Belief in Church Responses.” *Sociology of Religion* 62, no. 2 (2001): 205–20. doi:10.2307/3712456.

McNamara, Mary. “Review: ‘Rectify’ Is a Revelation That Sets a New Standard.” *Los Angeles Times*, April 22, 2013. http://articles.latimes.com/2013/apr/22/entertainment/la-et-st-rectify-20130422.

Mello Jr, John P. “Hulu Enters Original Content Biz with ‘Battleground’ Series.” *Tech Hive*, February 16, 2012. http://www.techhive.com/article/250089/hulu_gets_into_original_content_biz_with_series_called_battleground.html.

Mian, Bilal. “‘Daredevil’s’ Charlie Cox on Becoming a Religious Superhero.” *The Hollywood Reporter*, April 10, 2015. http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/live-feed/daredevils-charlie-cox-becoming-a-787809.

Miner, Brad. “Daredevil and the Devil.” *The Catholic Thing*, May 18, 2015. https://www.thecatholicthing.org/2015/05/18/daredevil-and-the-devil/.

Mitovich, Matt Webb, and Matt Webb Mitovich. “*Smallville*, *Supernatural* Returns Delayed a Week.” *TVLine*, January 28, 2011. http://tvline.com/2011/01/27/smallville-supernatural-returns-delayed-a-week/.

Mittell, Jason. “Complex TV.” *Complex TV*. Accessed March 25, 2016. http://mcpress.media-commons.org/complextelevision/.

---. “Forensic Fandom and the Drillable Text.” *Spreadable Media*, December 17, 2012. http://spreadablemedia.org/essays/mittell/.
---. “Narrative Complexity in Contemporary American Television.” *Velvet Light Trap: A Critical Journal Of Film & Television*, no. 58 (2006): 29–40.
---. *Genre and Television : From Cop Shows to Cartoons in American Culture / Jason Mittell*. New York: Routledge, 2004., 2004.
Moss, Charles. “Daredevil’s Greatest Superpower Is His Catholicism.” *Slate*, April 10, 2015. http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2015/04/netflix_s_daredevil_show_understands_that_catholicism_is_the_superhero_s.html.
Mullen, Megan Gwynne. *Television in the Multichannel Age: A Brief History of Cable Television*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub, 2008.
Murray, Simone. *The Adaptation Industry*. New York: Routledge, 2012.
Napoli, Philip M. *Audience Evolution : New Technologies and the Transformation of Media Audiences*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010.
Neale, Steve. *Genre and Hollywood*. New York: Routledge, 2000.
Newcomb, Horace, and Paul Hirsch. “Television as Cultural Forum.” In *Television: The Critical View*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.
Newcomb, Horace. “Religion on Television.” In *Channels of Belief: Religion and American Commercial Television*, edited by John P. Ferre, 29–44. Ames, IA: University of Iowa Press, 1990.
---. “‘This Is Not Al Dente’: The Sopranos and the New Meaning of ‘Television.’” In *Television: The Critical View*, edited by Horace Newcomb, 7th Ed., 561–78. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.
Newman, Michael Z. *Indie: An American Film Culture.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2011.
Newman, Michael Z., and Elana Levine. *Legitimating Television*. New York: Routledge, 2011.
Nussbaum, Emily. “Open Secret.” *The New Yorker*, September 29, 2014. http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/09/29/open-secret.
O’Hare, Kate. “How Catholic IS ‘Marvel’s Daredevil’ on Netflix?.” *Patheos*, April 10, 2015. http://www.patheos.com/blogs/kateohare/2015/04/how-catholic-is-marvels-daredevil-on-netflix/.
Paskin, Willa. “See Me: *Transparent* Is the Fall’s Only Great New Show.” *Slate*, September 29, 2014. http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/television/2014/09/transparent_on_amazon_prime_reviewed_it_s_the_fall_s_best_new_show.html.
Patten, Dominic. “‘The Walking Dead’ Ratings: More Cable Records In Live+3 Results.” *Deadline*, October 17, 2014. http://deadline.com/2014/10/the-walking-dead-premiere-ratings-new-cable-record-season-5-853406/.
Perez, Sarah. “Amazon Studios Now Funding Original Content Series For Amazon Instant Video Service.” *TechCrunch*, May 2, 2012.

http://techcrunch.com/2012/05/02/amazon-studios-now-funding-original-content-series-for-amazon-instant-video-service/.
Perlman, Allison Joyce. "Reforming the Wasteland: Television, Reform, and Social Movements, 1950-2004," 2008. https://repositories.lib.utexas.edu/handle/2152/3247.
Perlman, Ron. "Me Explaining to @_benipedia_ Why I Prefer Acting While Standing on 1 Foot… https://instagram.com/p/3MVRkoonps/." Microblog. *@perlmutations*, May 27, 2015. https://twitter.com/perlmutations/status/603604200321318912.
Perren, Alisa. "The Trick of the Trades: Media Industry Studies and the American Comic Book Industry." In *Production Studies, The Sequel.* Eds. Miranda Banks, Bridget Conor, and Vicki Mayer. New York: Rutledge, 2016.
Petersen, Line Nybro. "Renegotiating Religious Imaginations through Transformations of 'Banal Religion' in 'Supernatural.'" *Transformative Works and Cultures* 4, no. 0 (July 1, 2010).
Petski, Denise. "'Preacher' AMC Drama Series Gets Premiere Date." *Deadline*, March 14, 2016. http://deadline.com/2016/03/preacher-amc-drama-series-premiere-date-1201719886/.
Poniewozik, James. "*Friday Night Lights* Watch (Repost): Let's Go Home." *Time*, July 16, 2011. http://entertainment.time.com/2011/07/16/friday-night-lights-watch-repost-lets-go-home/.
---. "Streaming TV Isn't Just a New Way to Watch. It's a New Genre." *The New York Times*, December 16, 2015. http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/20/arts/television/streaming-tv-isnt-just-a-new-way-to-watch-its-a-new-genre.html.
Prudom, Laura. "'Supernatural' at 200: The Road So Far, An Oral History." *Variety*, November 11, 2014. http://variety.com/2014/tv/spotlight/supernatural-oral-history-200-episodes-ackles-padalecki-kripke-1201352537/.
---. "What Every TV Show Can Learn from Sleepy Hollow," December 3, 2013. http://theweek.com/articles/455254/what-every-tv-show-learn-from-sleepy-hollow.
Rackl, Lori. "Chicago Native Jill Soloway Creates Season's Best New Show, 'Transparent.'" *Chicago Sun-Times*, September 25, 2014. http://chicago.suntimes.com/entertainment/chicago-native-jill-soloway-creates-seasons-best-new-show-transparent/.
Reisman, Abraham. "What Daredevil Comics Should You Read When You're Done With the Netflix Series?" *Vulture*, April 11, 2015. http://www.vulture.com/2015/04/what-daredevil-comics-should-you-read-now.html.
Ritzenhoff, Karen A., and Angela Krewani. "Introduction." In *The Apocalypse in Film: Dystopias, Disasters, and Other Visions about the End of the World*, edited by Karen A. Ritzenhoff and Angela Krewani. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015.
Robinson, Joanna. "How the Emotionally Satisfying *Leftovers* Finale Learned from the Mistakes of *Lost*." *Vanity Fair*, December 7, 2015.

http://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2015/12/leftovers-finale-damon-lindelof-lost.
Rochlin, Margy. “In ‘Transparent,’ a Heroine Evolves Further Still.” *The New York Times*, November 27, 2015. http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/29/arts/television/in-transparent-a-heroine-evolves-further-still.html.
Rose-Holt, Sundi. “More than One Kind of Silence in ‘Rectify.’” *EW.com*, August 7, 2014. http://community.ew.com/2014/08/07/more-than-one-kind-of-silence-in-rectify/.
Rose, Lacey. “FX Chief: ‘HBO and FX Absolutely Dominated the Race for Quality in Television.’” *The Hollywood Reporter*, January 18, 2015. http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/live-feed/fx-chief-hbo-fx-absolutely-764581.
Round, Julia. “‘Is This a Book?’ DC Vertigo and the Redefinition of Comics in the 1990s.” In *The Rise of the American Comics Artist: Creators and Contexts*, edited by Paul Williams and James Lyons, 14–30. Jackson [Miss.]: University Press of Mississippi, 2010.
Ryan, Maureen. “‘Battlestar Galactica’ and ‘Lost’: The Similarities Are Spooky - The Watcher.” *Chicago Tribune*, June 9, 2008. http://featuresblogs.chicagotribune.com/entertainment_tv/2008/06/battlestar-gala.html.
Savage, Christina. “*Chuck* versus the Ratings: Savvy Fans and ‘Save Our Show’ Campaigns.” *Transformative Works and Cultures* 15, no. 0 (November 12, 2013).
Saval, Malina. “Jeffrey Tambor on ‘Transparent’: ‘People’s Lives Depend on This’.” *Variety*, March 18, 2016. http://variety.com/2016/scene/vpage/transparent-jeffrey-tambor-j-j-abrams-man-on-the-land-1201733683/.
Schneider, Steven. “Why NBC’s ‘Constantine’ Will Make You Forget about Keanu Reeves.” *Tech Times*, October 24, 2014. http://www.techtimes.com/articles/18659/20141024/why-nbcs-constantine-will-make-you-forget-about-keanu-reeves.htm.
Sciretta, Peter. “HBO Kills *Preacher* Television Series - /Film.” *Slashfilm*, August 26, 2008. http://www.slashfilm.com/hbo-kills-preacher-television-series/.
Seitz, Matt Zoller. “RECTIFY Is Proof That Christian Themes Can Connect with Agnostics and Atheists If the Work Is Good & Isn’t Actively Selling Anything.” Microblog. *@mattzollerseitz*, June 20, 2014. https://twitter.com/mattzollerseitz/status/479802518839382016.
---. “Sundance’s *Rectify*, Perhaps the Most Quiet Drama on TV, Is Truly Christian Art.” *Vulture*, June 19, 2014. http://www.vulture.com/2014/06/tv-review-rectify-season-2.html?mid=facebook_vulture.
Selznick, Barbara. “Branding the Future: Syfy in the Post-Network Era.” *Science Fiction Film and Television* 2, no. 2 (2009): 177–204.
Sepinwall, Alan. “Farewell to ‘Togetherness,’ a Rare Peak TV Cancellation.” *HitFix*. Accessed April 16, 2016. http://www.hitfix.com/whats-alan-watching/farewell-to-togetherness-a-rare-peak-tv-cancellation.

---. “Review: ‘The Leftovers’ Is Still TV’s Best Drama as Season 2 Begins.” *HitFix*, September 30, 2015. http://www.hitfix.com/whats-alan-watching/review-the-leftovers-is-still-tvs-best-drama-as-season-2-begins.
---. “Review: Amazon’s ‘Transparent’ Clearly the Best New Show of the Fall.” *HitFix*, September 24, 2014. http://www.hitfix.com/whats-alan-watching/review-amazons-transparent-clearly-the-best-new-show-of-the-fall.
---. *The Revolution Was Televised*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012.
Shanahan, Mark. “Adaptation: Tom Perrotta Is Growing Accustomed to Seeing His Books on the Big Screen.” *Boston.com*, October 18, 2006. http://archive.boston.com/news/globe/living/articles/2006/10/18/adaptation/.
Shaw, Bradley. “Baptizing Boo: Religion in the Cinematic Southern Gothic.” *Mississippi Quarterly* 63, no. 3/4 (2010): 445–76.
Smith, Jeffery A. “Hollywood Theology: The Commodification of Religion in Twentieth-Century Films.” *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 11, no. 2 (July 1, 2001): 191–231. doi:10.1525/rac.2001.11.2.191.
Smith, Samuel. “‘Lucifer’ Fox TV Series ‘Mocks the Bible,’ Says One Million Moms’ Petition to Cancel the Show.” *Christian Post*, May 29, 2015. http://www.christianpost.com/news/one-million-moms-says-new-fox-tv-series-lucifer-mocks-the-bible-starts-petition-urging-for-shows-cancellation-139742/.
Somaiya, Ravi. “Down to the Wire.” *The Guardian*, April 21, 2008, sec. Media. http://www.theguardian.com/media/2008/apr/21/television.tvandradioarts.
Sottek, T.C. “Netflix Challenges the TV Establishment with Emmy Wins for ‘House of Cards.’” *The Verge*, September 22, 2013. http://www.theverge.com/2013/9/22/4759754/netflix-challenges-the-tv-establishment-with-emmy-wins-for-house-of.
Spangler, Todd. “As Netflix Rises, Subscriptions to HBO, Showtime and Other Premium Nets Shrink as Percentage of U.S. Households: Report.” *Variety*, January 20, 2014. http://variety.com/2014/digital/news/as-netflix-rises-more-people-are-canceling-hbo-and-showtime-1201065399/.
Spigel, Lynn. “Entertainment Wars: Television Culture after 9/11.” *American Quarterly* 56, no. 2 (2004): 235–70.
---. *Welcome to the Dreamhouse: Popular Media and Postwar Suburbs*. Durham, NC, USA: Duke University Press, 2001. http://site.ebrary.com/lib/alltitles/docDetail.action?docID=10207659.
Spurgeon, Tom. “The Comics Reporter.” *The Comics Reporter*, February 7, 2014. http://www.comicsreporter.com/index.php/something_i_completely_missed_about_that_preacher_tv_project/.
Stanhope, Kate. “Comic-Con: ‘Lucifer’ Series Preview.” *The Hollywood Reporter*, July 10, 2015. http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/live-feed/comic-con-lucifer-series-preview-807888.
Stone, Brad. “Testing Over, Hulu.com to Open Its TV and Film Offerings This Week.” *The New York Times*, March 11, 2008. http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/11/business/media/11hulu.html.

Stone, Jon R. “A Fire in the Sky: ‘Apocalyptic’ Themes on the Silver Screen.” In *God in the Details: American Religion in Popular Culture*, edited by Eric Michael Mazur and Kate McCarthy, 2nd Ed., 62–79. New York: Routledge, 2011.

Stover, Matthew Wooding. “The Gods Suck.” In *So Say We All: An Unauthorized Collection of Thoughts and Opinions on Battlestar Galactica*, edited by Richard Hatch. Dallas TX: BonBella Books, 2006.

Suebsaeng, Asawin. “One Million Moms Promise Devil of a Time for ‘Lucifer’ TV Show.” *The Daily Beast*, June 7, 2015. http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/06/07/one-million-moms-promise-devil-of-a-time-for-lucifer-tv-show.html.

Thielman, Sam. “This Fall the Sundance Channel Will Begin Airing Ads.” *Adweek*, March 24, 2013. http://www.adweek.com/news/television/sundance-channel-goes-ad-supported-148128.

Tiggett, Jai. “Interview: ‘Hand of God’ Creator Ben Watkins Talks Hollywood’s Fear of Religion, Creating 360° Portrayals of Black Women, More.” *Shadow and Act, IndieWire*, August 27, 2014. http://blogs.indiewire.com/shadowandact/interview-hand-of-god-creator-ben-watkins-talks-hollywoods-fear-of-religion-creating-360-portrayals-of-black-women-more-20140827.

Todorov, Tsvetan. “The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre.” In *Fantastic Literature: A Critical Reader.* Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004.

Tripp, Jeffrey M. “Gabriel, Abortion, and Anti-Annunciation in The Prophecy, Constantine, and Legion.” *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 27, no. 1 (2015): 57–70.

Tryon, Chuck. “TV Got Better: Netflix’s Original Programming Strategies and the On-Demand Television Transition.” *Media Industries* 2, no. 2 (December 27, 2015). http://www.mediaindustriesjournal.org/index.php/mij/article/view/126.

Tucker, Ken. “The CW’s Identity Crisis: Are ‘Supernatural’ and ‘Smallville’ Better than ‘Gossip Girl’ and ‘90210’?.” *Entertainment Weekly’s EW.com*, February 26, 2010. http://www.ew.com/article/2010/02/26/cw-smallville-supernatural-smallville-gossip-girl-90210.

Turner, Graeme, and Jinna Tay. *Television Studies After TV : Understanding Television in the Post-Broadcast Era*. 1st ed. Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2009.

Turow, Joseph. *Breaking up America: Advertisers and the New Media World*. Chicago, Ill: University of Chicago Press, 1998.

---. *Niche Envy: Marketing Discrimination in the Digital Age*. Cambridge, Mass.: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2006.

Valentine, Evan. “*Daredevil* Season 1 Episode 9 ‘Speak of the Devil’ Recap.” *Collider*, May 7, 2015. http://collider.com/daredevil-season-1-episode-9-speak-of-the-devil-recap/.

Vespe, Eric. “Quint Talks Neighbors, Deleted Scenes and *Preacher* with Seth Rogen and Evan Goldberg!” *Aint It Cool News*, March 12, 2014. http://www.aintitcool.com/node/66516.

Vine, Richard. “Better than *The Wire*?” *The Guardian*, March 18, 2009, sec. Television & radio. http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2009/mar/19/battlestar-galactica-review.
Wagmeister, Elizabeth. “Syfy Cancels ‘Dominion’ After Two Seasons.” *Variety*, October 13, 2015. http://variety.com/2015/tv/news/dominion-cancelled-syfy-season-two-1201617277/.
Wagner, Laura. “New York Subway Pulls Nazi-Themed Ads For New Show, ‘Man In The High Castle.’” *NPR.org*, November 25, 2015. http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2015/11/25/457410075/new-york-subway-pulls-nazi-themed-ads-for-new-show-the-man-in-the-high-castle.
Wallace, Daniel B. “Is ‘Lucifer’ the Devil in Isaiah 14:12? - The KJV Argument against Modern Translations.” *Bible.org*, March 22, 2010. https://bible.org/article/lucifer-devil-isaiah-1412-kjv-argument-against-modern-translations.
Wallenstein, Andrew. “Netflix Ratings Revealed: New Data Sheds Light on Original Series’ Audience Levels.” *Variety*, April 28, 2015. http://variety.com/2015/digital/news/netflix-originals-viewer-data-1201480234/.
---. “The OTT View-Niverse: A Map of the New Video Ecosystem.” *Variety*, April 29, 2015. http://variety.com/2015/digital/news/ott-map-video-ecosystem-1201480930/.
Warren, Christina. “HANDS ON: Amazon’s Prime Instant Video.” *Mashable*, February 22, 2011. http://mashable.com/2011/02/22/amazon-prime-instant-video/.
Weber, Max. “The Sociology of Religion.” In *Introducing Religion: Readings from the Classic Theorists*, edited by Daniel L. Pals, 255–60. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.
Weisman, Jon. “Emmy Nominations Announced: ‘House of Cards’ Makes History.” *Variety*, July 18, 2013. http://variety.com/2013/tv/awards/emmy-nominees-2013-emmys-awards-nominations-full-list-1200564301/.
Wetmore, Jr., Kevin J. *The Theology of Battlestar Galactica*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2012.
Williams, Oscar. “Social Engagement Now More Important than TV Ratings, Says Fremantle Boss.” *The Guardian*, January 21, 2015, sec. Media Network. http://www.theguardian.com/media-network/2015/jan/21/social-media-engagement-tv-ratings-fremantle.
Winston, Diane, ed. *Small Screen, Big Picture: Television and Lived Religion*. Baylor University Press, 2009.
---. “Introduction.” In *Small Screen, Big Picture: Television and Lived Religion*, edited by Diane Winston, 1–14. Baylor University Press, 2009.
Wolfe, Elizabeth G. “The Greatest of These: The Theological Virtues and the Problem of an Absent God in *Supernatural*.” In *Supernatural, Humanity, and the Soul*, edited by Susan A. George and Regina M. Hansen, 13–26. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.
Wolff, Richard. *The Church on TV*. New York: Continuum, 2010.

Wuthnow, Robert. *After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950s*. EBook. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998.